



# **The Founding Fathers of American Jihad:**

The Impacts and Legacies of Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir  
Khan, and Ahmad Abousamra

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NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM,  
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Three of the most influential individuals in the evolution of English-language jihadist propaganda are the Americans Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir Khan, and Ahmad Abousamra. Al-Awlaki and Khan are perhaps best known for founding and editing Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire* magazine while Abousamra edited the Islamic State's *Dabiq* and *Rumiyyah* magazines. However, their legacies, especially those of al-Awlaki and Khan, extends well-beyond the propaganda sphere, with their influences evident in some of the most significant strategic, operational, and ideological trends in the dramatic transformation of Salafi-jihadism in the West this century. While there is considerable scholarship devoted to analyzing English-language jihadist propaganda, this study partly seeks to contribute to analyses of the propagandists themselves as a means to develop a more nuanced picture of violent extremist threats. This study applies Ligon et al's CIP (Charismatic, Ideological, and Pragmatic) leadership framework to analyze the different legacies and impacts of the three Americans arguing that al-Awlaki emerges as the quintessential charismatic leader, Khan as an ideological leader, and Abousamra as a pragmatic leader. These distinctions in leadership styles are reflective of the different personal attributes, backgrounds, and organizational contexts within which the individuals operated. Moreover, these differences in leadership characteristics shaped their respective impacts and legacies in ways that have important implications for the fields of research and practice.

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## The Founding Fathers of American Jihad: The Impact & Legacy of Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir Khan, & Ahmad Abousamra

Three Americans have had a profound impact on the evolution of jihadist English-language propaganda, particularly in the online magazine format, and revolutionized jihadi strategic, operational, and ideological trends in the West: Anwar al-Awlaki (1971-2011) and Samir Khan (1985-2011) who edited Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire*, and Ahmad Abousamra (1981-2017) who edited the Islamic State's *Dabiq* and *Rumiyyah* magazines. The Americans were not the first to publish English-language magazines designed to appeal to Western audiences and mobilize support for wars in Muslim lands. That distinction arguably goes to the *Cultural Council of Afghanistan Resistance* and its quarterly magazine *Afghan Jihad*, which was in print from 1987 to 1992.<sup>1</sup>

Nor were the Americans the first to produce an online jihadist English-language magazine with the pioneering Australian magazine *Nida'ul Islam* emerging in the 1990s over a decade before Khan's *Jihad Recollections* (a fact acknowledged in the magazine's second issue).<sup>2</sup> Yet these three Americans, in their own ways, revolutionized jihadist English-language propaganda. What separates Al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra from their predecessors and peers is arguably their unique leadership roles, the strategic and historical context within which they were active, and the posthumous legacies that their respective organizations (and other Sunni jihadists) have tried to exploit.

This study analyzes this interplay of factors towards two aims. First, it draws on the CIP Leadership Framework<sup>3</sup> and charismatic leadership studies<sup>4</sup> to argue that al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra's respective leadership roles in al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State enabled them to not only innovatively shape English-language propaganda practices but also, to varying degrees, position themselves as inspirational figures to Western audiences. This study refers to al-Awlaki as 'the charismatic', Khan as 'the propagandist', and

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<sup>1</sup> The Afghanistan Center at Kabul University has an online archive which contains issues of the *Afghan Jihad Quarterly*: <http://www.afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/handle/azu/20980>.

<sup>2</sup> Editor, 2009, "Editors", *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 2): p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 312-334.

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, 1968, *Economy and Society*. New York: Bedminster Press; Anne Willner, 1984. *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Edward Shils 1965. "Charisma, Order, and Status", *American Sociological Review* 30(2), 199-213; Boas Shamir, 1991, "Charismatic Relationship: Alternative Explanations and Predictions", *Leadership Quarterly*, 2(2), 81-104; Shmuel Eisenstadt, 1995, "Charisma and Institution Building: Max Weber and Modern Sociology", *Power Trust and Meaning*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 167-201; Bryman, A. 1999. *Charisma and Leadership in Organizations*. London: Sage.

Abousamra as 'the technocrat' to capture their respective backgrounds and leadership roles within the organizational and strategic context of AQAP and the Islamic State. Indeed, al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra emerge as exemplars of the CIP leadership framework's charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leader typologies.

Second, it argues that their posthumous legacies largely emerge from the efforts of both their respective organizations and other Sunni jihadists to present al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra as iconic martyr figures of the global jihad. This study applies a life narrative approach, drawn from the CIP Leadership Framework, to analyze al-Awlaki and Khan's eulogies in *Inspire* and Abousamra's eulogy in *Rumiyah*.<sup>5</sup> It particularly focuses on how origination, turning point, anchoring, analogous, redemptive, and contaminating 'life events' were leveraged in these eulogies to project its subjects as inspirational jihadi figures worthy of emulation. Given the internet was the primary forum for the dissemination of their content and projecting their posthumous legacy, the iconography associated with these leaders, especially in the case of Al-Awlaki and Khan, contributed to how audiences perceived them in life and death. Consequently, this report incorporates this imagery into its analysis.<sup>6</sup>

This study begins by outlining the conceptual frameworks and methods that inform its analyses. It then features the three case studies of al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra focusing on their respective backgrounds, leadership styles, influence, and posthumous appeal. This section then considers their collective impact on Western jihadism and briefly outlines the content and design characteristics of *Inspire*, *Dabiq*, and *Rumiyah* to highlight and contrast their contributions to jihadi English language propaganda. This study concludes with a suite of research and policy implications based on its key findings. What emerges from this analysis is the impact that al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra had and, especially in the case of al-Awlaki, continue to have on not only in the evolution of jihadi English-language propaganda but strategic, operational, and ideological trends in Western jihadi networks. The picture that emerges from this study is of the importance of examining the lives, influences, and impact of propagandists as a way to develop a more nuanced understanding of almost every aspect of violent extremist threats - from propaganda and recruitment practices to leadership and organizational dynamics.

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<sup>5</sup> Harith Al Nadari, 2012, "My story with Al Awlaki", *Inspire* (Issue 9): pp.8-12.; Abu Yazeed, "Samir Khan: The Face of Joy", *Inspire* (Issue 9): 14-19.; Rumiyah. 2017. "Among the Believers Are Men," April 2017.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the role of imagery in terrorist propaganda see Charlie Winter, 2021, *The Terrorist Image: Decoding the Islamic State's Photo-Propaganda*, Hurst, London.

## Leadership Types, Life Narratives, and Charisma

It is well-established in leadership studies that a variety of different types of leadership can potentially emerge in any given social and/or organizational setting. Different forms of leadership tend to be distinguished from one another based on a variety of different factors, but the most important concerns the nature of the leader-follower relationship. For instance, Weber's seminal work identified legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic authority ideal-types that are distinguished by differences in the bond between leader and subordinates. Legal-rational authority relies on the satisfaction of established laws such as the election of an official. In contrast, traditional leaders emerge due to socio-cultural traditions bestowing authority to an individual. For example, when authority is established by birth right in a monarchy. On the other hand, charismatic leadership is characterized by an emotion-based leader-follower bond that forms due to the leader being perceived by their supporters as having exceptional traits.<sup>7</sup> While Weber's work has been highly influential in leadership scholarship, the field has since expanded and diversified to address the conceptual shortcomings in Weber's model. For instance, Weber's leadership model is broadly useful for understanding different types of political authority but less so for organizational leadership. In contrast, Ligon et al's CIP (Charismatic, Ideological, and Pragmatic) framework, while inspired by Weber's three distinctions, offers a model of leadership that is more readily applicable to modern organizational and social movement contexts.<sup>8</sup>

This study draws on the charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic types of 'outstanding leadership' at the heart of the CIP Framework. According to Ligon, Hunter, and Mumford, 'charismatic leaders' are characterized by "a passionate vision of a future radically different from present conditions.... if [followers] accept the leader's movement."<sup>9</sup> They argue an ideological leader "employs personal values and beliefs in decision-making and motivating" in a form of leadership described as "belief-based".<sup>10</sup> In contrast to these vision-based styles of leadership, the problem-based or pragmatic leader is "focused on the careful analysis and solution of day-to-day issues in the immediate environment."<sup>11</sup> This study broadly draws on these three leadership types to consider the different leadership roles and impacts that Awlaki

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, 1968, *Economy and Society*. New York: Bedminster Press: 215.

<sup>8</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 312-334; Gina Scott Ligon, Michael K. Logan, Douglas C. Derrick, 2021, *Malevolent charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders*, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>9</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 313.

<sup>10</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 313.

<sup>11</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 313.

and Khan had in AQAP and Abousamra in the Islamic State. The CIP Framework offers scholars a versatile model through which to analyze the relationship between these three leadership types and tendencies in personalized/socialized orientation, psychological traits, organizational contexts, propensity to violence, and life narratives.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to broadly drawing on Ligon's three leadership types, this study also applies the CIP framework's emphasis on the role of the leader's life narratives as potentially serving both a directive function and a vehicular function. The directive function is the tendency for life narratives to provide "life lessons in episodic form used to define goals, causes, actions, and context in the present."<sup>13</sup> The vehicular function is the tendency for "life narratives to provide a vehicle for people to communicate personal understanding of their lives in reference to the current situation."<sup>14</sup> Ligon et al. drew on Pillemer<sup>15</sup> and McAdams<sup>16</sup> to identify six life events that characterize the life narratives of outstanding leaders: originating events (beginning of a career or personal path), turning points (changes in life direction), anchoring events (establishing a belief system), analogous events (present event that relates to the past), redemptive events (negative occurrences that later have a positive impact), and contaminating events (positive occurrences that later have a negative impact).<sup>17</sup> Ligon et al. argue that the life narrative approach is best applied to analyze the autobiographies of leaders and this study applies it to analyze the eulogies for al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra produced by AQAP and the Islamic State.

Finally, it is important to clearly establish what this study means by charismatic leadership, not only because al-Awlaki is an exemplar of a charismatic leader<sup>18</sup> and that all three leaders have varying degrees of posthumous charismatic appeal, but because the term 'charisma' is frequently misapplied and misunderstood as a personality trait. Rather, "charisma" should be understood as the emotion-based bond that defines the charismatic leader-follower relationship. Unlike the relationship between a cult leader and followers, the charismatic leader-

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<sup>12</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 312-334; Gina Scott Ligon, Michael K. Logan, Douglas C. Derrick, 2021, *Malevolent charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders*, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>13</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 314.

<sup>14</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 314.

<sup>15</sup> David Pillemer, 2001, "Momentous events and the life story", *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2): pp.123-134.

<sup>16</sup> Dan McAdams, 2001, "The psychology of life stories", *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2): pp.100-123.

<sup>17</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 315.

<sup>18</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, 2021, "Sunni jihadist charismatic leadership: the case Anwar al-Awlaki (1971-2011)", *Routledge International Handbook of Charisma*, edited by Jose Pedro Zuquete, Routledge, New York: pp.288-299.

follower relationship is reciprocal, interdependent, and mutually empowering.<sup>19</sup> This is because a charismatic leader must project both an image that is seen as extraordinary and a message that resonates with followers for the relationship to be maintained. Perceptions of crisis in communities of potential support is the defining psychosocial condition for the emergence and maintenance of the charismatic leader-follower relationship.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, charismatic leaders leverage perceptions of crisis amongst supporters and propose solutions articulated in their messages and symbolized in their image.<sup>21</sup> In short, charismatic leaders exploit perceptions of crisis to present themselves as uniquely positioned to understand and solve crises for their supporters. In the Sunni jihadist milieu, charismatic leaders tend to emerge by building on the charismatic capital of predecessors in a form of routinization called transformative charisma.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Sunni jihadist charismatic figures will often draw upon the image and message of predecessors to present themselves as the torchbearer of their predecessors' legacies.

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<sup>19</sup> Alan Bryman, 1999, *Charisma and Leadership in Organizations*. London, Sage; Boas Shamir, Michael Arthur, Robert House. 1994. "The Rhetoric of Charismatic Leadership: A Theoretical Extension, a Case Study, and Implications for Research", *Leadership Quarterly*, 5(1), 25–42.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Willner, 1984. *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Edward Shils 1965. "Charisma, Order, and Status", *American Sociological Review* 30(2), 199–213.

<sup>21</sup> Boas Shamir, 1991, "Charismatic Relationship: Alternative Explanations and Predictions", *Leadership Quarterly*, 2(2), 81–104; Shmuel Eisenstadt, 1995, "Charisma and Institution Building: Max Weber and Modern Sociology", *Power Trust and Meaning*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 167–201; Bryman, A. 1999. *Charisma and Leadership in Organizations*. London: Sage.

<sup>22</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, 2016, *The charismatic leadership phenomenon in radical and militant Islamism*, Routledge, New York.

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The purpose of the following case studies is to broadly examine the lives, leadership, impact, and posthumous appeal of al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra. It considers the similarities and differences between the three Americans to identify lessons for both scholars and strategic-policy practitioners. The iconography that emerged around these figures, especially al-Awlaki and, in the later stages of his life, Khan, played an important role in their impacts and legacies. What emerges from these analyses is that al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra were fundamentally different types of leaders reflecting not only their different personal backgrounds but their respective roles in AQAP and the Islamic State. Consequently, each uniquely contributed to the evolution of jihadist English-language propaganda and helped to drive operational, strategic, and ideological trends in Western networks that continue to play out to this day.

### *Anwar Al-Awlaki, 1971-2011: The Charismatic*

The story of Anwar al-Awlaki's life has been laid out and analyzed in several excellent works, the most comprehensive of which are Scott Shane's *Objective Troy*<sup>23</sup> and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens' *Incitement*.<sup>24</sup> The basic details of al-Awlaki's background and life story are broadly known. Born in New Mexico in 1971 to Yemeni-born parents, al-Awlaki built a reputation through the late-1990s as an imam who made Islam accessible to young English-speaking Muslims in the West by breaking down linguistic and ideological barriers with his engaging rhetorical style. It is important to note that al-Awlaki was identified in *The 9/11 Commission Report* for his links to

Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar during this period.<sup>25</sup> However, after 2001, al-Awlaki's public sermons and activism became increasingly radical and, after leaving the United States in 2002, he transformed in the intervening years into a proponent of militant Islamism eventually becoming the front man of AQAP's English-language propaganda in 2010 co-editing the magazine alongside Samir Khan. Both were killed by U.S. drone strike on September 30, 2011. Rather than regurgitate the narrative of Awlaki's life story here,<sup>26</sup> this analysis will focus on how



Inspire Magazine photo of Anwar al-Awlaki

<sup>23</sup> Scott Shane, 2016, *Objective Troy: A terrorist, a President, and the rise of the drone*. Random House, New York.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2020, *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>25</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, Washington D.C.: national Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States.

<sup>26</sup> Also see Scott Shane. 2015. "The Lessons of Anwar al-Awlaki", *The New York Times*:

[www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/magazine/the-lessons-of-anwar-al-awlaki.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/magazine/the-lessons-of-anwar-al-awlaki.html); *The Anwar al-Awlaki File: National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 529*. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB529-Anwar-al-Awlaki-File/>;

al-Awlaki as a charismatic figure constructed and projected his image and message to mobilize his target audiences, particularly second and third generation Muslims living in the West. To understand al-Awlaki's charismatic appeal it is useful to begin by considering the breadth of his influence amongst Western jihadis before considering how he constructed and projected a particular image and narrative which has since been posthumously leveraged by other jihadists.

### *The Siren of Jihad in the West*

Al-Awlaki's influence has been tied to dozens of terrorist incidences across several western nations including over fifty in the United States, over thirty in the United Kingdom, and many others across Europe, Canada, and Australia. During his life, al-Awlaki was linked to several high-profile terrorist incidences including:

- The Fort Hood shooting, committed by Nidal Hasan on November 5, 2009, resulting in the death of 13 with 32 injured.<sup>27</sup>
- The Underwear Bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted to bring down Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on December 25, 2009.
- The 2010 Times Square attempted car bombing by Faisal Shahzad on May 1, 2010.
- Roshonara Choudhry's attempted murder of a British MP on May 14, 2010.

That these three incidents involved a Virginia-born 39-year-old U.S. Army Major, a twenty-three-year-old Nigerian, a 30-year-old Pakistani born U.S. citizen, and a 21-year-old English woman gives some insight into the scope of al-Awlaki's influence in life. Most of the terrorist incidences inspired, to varying degrees, by al-Awlaki have occurred after his death. These include:

- The Boston Marathon bombing on April 15, 2013, committed by the Tsarnaev brothers, that killed 3 while injuring well-over 200.<sup>28</sup>
- Lee Rigby's murder on May 22, 2013, in Woolwich, England.<sup>29</sup>

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Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2011, "As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad", *International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence*. <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ICSR-Report-As-American-As-Apple-Pie-How-Anwar-al-Awlaki-Became-the-Face-of-Western-Jihad.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Katharine Poppe, 2018, *Nidal Hasan: A case study in lone-actor terrorism*, Program on Extremism (October 2018). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Nidal%20Hasan.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Bergen, David Steman, 2014, "The man who inspired the Boston bombings", CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/11/opinion/bergen-boston-bombing-awlaki-jihadists/index.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, 2018, "How Lee Rigby's murder changed the face of terror", *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/15/day-new-terror-unleashed-lee-rigby-murder-woolwich>.

- 2015 Chattanooga shootings, committed by Muhammad Abdulazeez, killing 6 and injuring 2.<sup>30</sup>
- The 2015 Charlie Hebdo shootings that killed 12 in Paris on January 7, 2015.<sup>31</sup>
- The 2015 San Bernardino shootings by the married couple, Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik, that killed 14 people on December 2, 2015.<sup>32</sup>
- The Pulse Nightclub shooting on June 12, 2016.<sup>33</sup>

Such is al-Awlaki's influence on Western jihadists that in the decade since his death it is rare to find a terrorist incident where al-Awlaki's lectures and videos have not been some source of inspiration. It is not only national security officials in western nations that have recognized al-Awlaki's profound impact. Despite him having minimal impact in Arabic-speaking jihadist circles,<sup>34</sup> Al-Qaida affiliated groups and eventually even its archrival the Islamic State would seek to leverage al-Awlaki's posthumous charisma in an effort to boost their own credentials amongst English-speaking Muslims. For example, the Islamic State's *Al-I'tisam Media* produced a nine-part video series in 2014 titled "The Establishment of the Islamic State" which featured a still image of al-Awlaki with audio of him praising the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq. That al-Awlaki was one of several iconic jihadi figures including Zarqawi, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, and Osama Bin Laden is testimony to his perceived significance in the pantheon of Sunni jihadist charismatic figures.



*The Establishment of the Islamic State*

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Dienst, Miguel Almaguer, 2015, "Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez Downloaded Recordings from Radical Cleric, Officials Say", *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/chattanooga-shooting/mohammad-youssef-abdulazeez-downloaded-recordings-radical-cleric-officials-say-n395986>.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Bergen, 2015, "The American who inspires terror from Paris to the U.S.", *CNN*, 13 January 2015. <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/11/opinion/bergen-american-terrorism-leader-paris-attack/index.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Greg Miller, 2015, "Al-Qaeda figure seen as key inspiration for San Bernardino attacker", *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/al-qaeda-figure-seen-as-key-inspiration-for-san-bernardino-attacker/2015/12/18/f0e00d80-a5a0-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/al-qaeda-figure-seen-as-key-inspiration-for-san-bernardino-attacker/2015/12/18/f0e00d80-a5a0-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb_story.html).

<sup>33</sup> Scott Shane, 2016, "The enduring influence of Anwar al-Awlaki in the Age of the Islamic State", *CTC Sentinel* 9(7). <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-enduring-influence-of-anwar-al-awlaki-in-the-age-of-the-islamic-state/>.

<sup>34</sup> Richard A. Nielsen, 2017, *Deadly Clerics: Blocked ambitions and the paths to jihad*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

### Warrior-Scholar & Martyr

Al-Awlaki is an archetypal charismatic leader in the proper scholarly sense of the term.<sup>35</sup> At the heart of his charismatic appeal is the image and story of a child of the West turned jihadi warrior-scholar. It was an image defined by reflective and aspirational qualities. In his efforts to appeal to second and third generation Muslim youth in the West, al-Awlaki strategically presented himself as, like them, a child of the West who felt rejected by the society into which they were born, persecuted, and targeted in the name of the 'War on Terror', and were searching for solutions to their sense of crisis. In his relaxed colloquial style, al-Awlaki spoke in fluent English, with just a hint of an American accent, often sounding like a concerned older brother or friend. Those same rhetorical traits that had made Al-Awlaki a popular imam through the late-1990s, connecting English-speaking Muslims with their religion and breaking down linguistic barriers, he later used to try and inspire them to mobilize to violence:



*AQAP Propaganda Image – Anwar al-Awlaki as a warrior-scholar and martyr*

I for one, was born in the US, and lived in the US for 21 years. America was my home. I was a preacher of Islam involved in non-violent activism. However, with the American invasion of Iraq and continued US aggression against Muslims, I could not reconcile between living in the US and being a Muslim, and I eventually came to the conclusion that jihad against America is binding upon myself, just as it is binding on every other able Muslim.<sup>36</sup>

In many ways al-Awlaki leveraged his own radicalization as not only a symbolic reflection of the sentiments and experiences within his target audiences but a legitimization of their own transformation emotionally, strategically, and jurisprudentially. As Meleagrou-Hitchens asserts:

<sup>35</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, 2021, "Sunni jihadist charismatic leadership: the case Anwar al-Awlaki (1971-2011)", *Routledge International Handbook of Charisma*, edited by Jose Pedro Zuquete, Routledge, New York: pp.288-299. Also see Haroro J. Ingram, 2016, *The charismatic leadership phenomenon in radical and militant Islamism*, Routledge, New York: pp. 199-224.

<sup>36</sup> Anwar Al-Awlaki, 2010, "May Our Souls Be Sacrificed For You!", *Inspire* (Summer 2010), Al-Malahem Media: 57.

Awlaki represents the most effective and refined version of his English speaking Salafi-Jihadi predecessors, who has adapted more effectively to Western political and social culture. However, unlike his forebears, he was also long considered a leading moderate Muslim and critic of al-Qaeda, having cultivated his image in the years both before and immediately following 9/11. The ideological and intellectual journey that is evident within his public discourse makes him a useful and pertinent case study for the radicalization of Western Muslims.<sup>37</sup>

The contrast between two quotes captures the stark change in al-Awlaki from, at least outwardly, projecting an almost pacifistic image to AQAP's chief English-language propagandist. The first is from October 2001, soon after the September 11 attacks, when al-Awlaki, dressed in a suit jacket and *taqiyah*, stated to an attentive audience:

We are talking about ways to bring an end to this war. And we, as Muslims, we want to bring an end to terrorism more than anybody else. Our position needs to be reiterated and needs to be very clear. The fact that the US has administered the death and homicide of over one million civilians in Iraq; the fact that the US is supporting the deaths and killing of thousands of Palestinians; does not justify the killing of one US civilian in New York City or Washington DC. And the deaths of six thousand civilians in New York and Washington DC does not justify the death of one civilian in Afghanistan. There is anger and resentment but not hatred.<sup>38</sup>

Less than a decade later, in May 2010, al-Awlaki featured in an AQAP propaganda video, soon after being identified as the inspiration for the 2009 Fort Hood and Underpants Bomber attacks, announcing:



*Anwar al-Awlaki at Dar al Hijrah Mosque, October 4, 2001. Photo by Tracy Woodward*

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2011, "As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad", *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*.

<https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ICSR-Report-As-American-As-Apple-Pie-How-Anwar-al-Awlaki-Became-the-Face-of-Western-Jihad.pdf>.

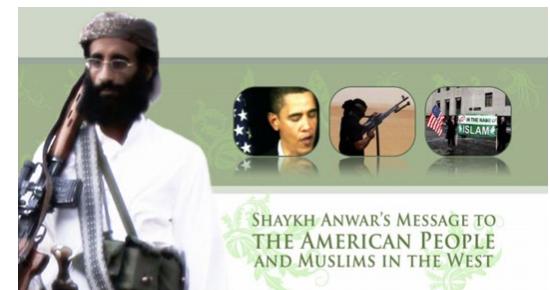
<sup>38</sup> Anwar Al-Awlaki, 2001, "Excerpts of an October 2001 Khutbah by Imam al-Awlaki", *PBS NewsHour* (transcribed by author).

For 50 years, an entire people – the Muslim in Palestine – has been strangled, with American aid, support, and weapons. Twenty years of siege and then occupation of Iraq, and now, the occupation of Afghanistan. After all this, no one should even ask us about targeting a bunch of Americans who would have been killed in an airplane. Our unsettled account with America includes, at the very least, one million women and children.<sup>39</sup>



Still from AQAP propaganda video featuring Anwar al-Awlaki

Of course, al-Awlaki also displayed aspirational qualities, i.e. personality traits, skills, and qualifications that were a source of inspiration for his supporters. Al-Awlaki projected the image of a warrior-scholar, someone who had both the knowledge of a scholar of Islam but also engaged on the battlefield. The reality is that al-Awlaki did not have a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence and, while he may have directed terrorist attacks in the West and certainly indirectly inspired many, he had little operational battlefield experience.<sup>40</sup> However, working with Samir Khan as the co-editors of *Inspire*, al-Awlaki used the magazine to help construct his warrior-scholar image. This image is, after all, the most revered type of charismatic leader in the Sunni jihadist milieu and al-Awlaki strategically drew upon the charismatic capital of predecessors to present himself as the bearer of a great historical legacy: “We see that in our contemporary times with people like Syed Qutb. He wrote with ink and his own blood. People like Shaykh Abdullah Azzam and Shaykh Yusuf al ‘Uyayree. They wrote amazing books, and after they died it was as if Allah made their soul enter their words to make it alive; it gives their words



All praise is due to Allāh and may peace and blessings be upon His Messenger Muhammad, his family, and his companions.  
Peace be upon those who follow the guidance.  
To the American people I say:  
Do you remember the good old days when Americans were enjoying the blessings of security and peace? When the word 'terrorism' was rarely invoked, and when you were oblivious to any threats? I remember a time when you would go to the supermarket and picket the classified sections of your local or college newspaper, and use it even though it was issued to a different name because no one would bother asking you for an ID before boarding a plane. No long lines, no elaborate searches, no body scans, no sniffing dogs, no taking off your shoes and emptying your pockets.

You were a nation at ease.

But America forgot that it could threaten the lives of others, and then it would do so without any compunction without bearing the consequences of its actions.<sup>1</sup> 9-11 was the answer of the millions of people who suffer from American aggression. And since then America has not been safe. And nine years after 9-11, years of spending, and nine years of beefing up security, you are still unsafe even in the holiest and most sacred of days to you, Christmas Day.

So do you expect to transgress against others and yet be spared retribution?

Your decision makers: the politicians, the lobbyists, and the major corporations are the ones gaining from your foreign policy, and you are the ones paying the price for it.

Following 9-11, The American people gave George W. Bush, the Bush Doctrine, and gave him a blank check to spend as much as needed to fulfill that objective. The result? He failed, and he failed miserably. So if America failed to defeat the mujahidin when it gave its president unlimited support, how can it win with Obama who is on a short leash? If America failed to win when it was at its pinnacle of economic strength, how can it win today with a recession at hand?

The simple answer is: America cannot and will not. The talk of a 'new world order' is no rolling back of the worldwide jihad movement. On the eve of 9-11 it was Afghanistan alone. Today it is Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the list is growing.

How many body bags are American families willing to

*Inspire Magazine* featuring message from Anwar al-Awlaki “to the American people and Muslims in the West”

<sup>39</sup> Anwar Al-Awlaki, 2010, “Yemeni-American Jihadi Cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki in First interview with Al-Qaeda Media Calls on Muslim U.S. Servicemen to Kill Fellow Soldiers and Says: “My Message to the Muslims... Is That We Should Participate in Jihad Against America”, The Middle East Media Research Institute.

<sup>40</sup> As is typical of a charismatic figure, the image they project and their message does not necessarily reflect reality, especially in their personal lives. Carol Cratty, 2013, “Anwar al-Awlaki visited prostitutes, FBI documents say”, CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/03/us/fbi-al-awlaki-prostitution/index.html>.

a new life.”<sup>41</sup> Other Sunni jihadist groups also helped to reinforce al-Awlaki’s image. For example, in a letter to al-Awlaki, the Somali group Al-Shabaab reinforced his warrior-scholar image declaring: “O Sheikh, we would not only look at you as only a soldier, but as the likes of Ibn Taymiya during the trials of the Ta’tars.”<sup>42</sup>

When in July 2010 the Obama administration made al-Awlaki the first U.S. citizen to be listed as a ‘specially designated global terrorist’, it helped to fuse the reflective and inspirational components of his charismatic appeal. That a Muslim would be the first U.S. citizen to be



Inspire Magazine article on death of Anwar al-Awlaki's son

designated as a global terrorist and targeted by U.S. forces was leveraged by al-Awlaki to reinforce the sense that Muslim citizens were treated differently to non-Muslim citizens in western democracies. That he was being targeted at all further amplified his profile as an inspirational figure. When he was killed by U.S. drone strike on September 30, 2011, his image was elevated to the status of a martyred warrior-scholar in the eyes of supporters. Two weeks later, al-Awlaki's sixteen-year-old son was also killed by drone strike and then, in January 2017, al-Awlaki's eight-year-old daughter would be killed in a joint U.S.-UAE raid in Yemen adding further layers to al-Awlaki's posthumously evolving legacy.<sup>43</sup> Before examining al-Awlaki's posthumous charismatic appeal, it is important to first consider the key features of his message.

Just like his image, al-Awlaki's message drew upon the perceptions of crisis linked to the ‘Wars on Terror’ experienced by Muslims in the West, particularly second and third generation Muslim youth. Al-Awlaki spoke directly and unequivocally to them transforming their status from the fringes of the Muslim world and on the sidelines of the ‘Wars on Terror’ in the Middle East to the heart of the 21<sup>st</sup> century struggle for Islam behind the enemies’ lines:

[I]f you talk about some youth in the West, who are second or third generation Muslims, they are carrying on to clear understanding of Islam. It's amazing to see that.... These

<sup>41</sup> Anwar Al-Awlaki, 2005, *Constants on the Path of Jihad by Shaykh Yusuf al 'Uyayree: Lecture series by Imam Anwar al Awlaki*.

<sup>42</sup> Shebaab al-Mujahideen. 2008. “Shebaab al-Mujahideen: Reply to the greetings and advice of Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki.” <https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/790971/download>.

<sup>43</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2017, “The Yemen Raid and the Ghost of Anwar al-Awlaki”, *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/yemen-raid-trump-awlaki-al-qaeda-isis/516180/>.

are living in the Den of the Lion, they are subjected, they are the first line of defense in this war of ideas and they are subjected to the brunt of it. Nevertheless, they are holding on to the truth!<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, al-Awlaki would draw parallels between the struggles of Muslim youth in the West and those of the Prophet Muhammed: "Living as a minority, we will go through the trials that the Muslims living in Makkah had to go through."<sup>45</sup> For al-Awlaki, the surveillance and jailing of Muslims in the West or the killing of fellow Muslims overseas was the crudest tools in the West's 'War on Islam'. Far more damaging was what al-Awlaki saw as an assault on the principles and teachings of Islam under the guise of championing so-called 'moderates.' In *Battle of Hearts and Minds*, al-Awlaki cites a RAND Report that outlines the traits of moderate Muslims and policy recommendations, declaring: "Now hear this again 'The US is trying to change Islam itself!' Without any shame, they are openly stating that we have a desire not only to influence the Muslim societies but we want to change the religion itself."<sup>46</sup> He goes onto assert:

...when a Muslim, a true Muslim, hears this, he hears that non-Muslims who have no knowledge about the religion, who do not believe in Allah Almighty who don't believe in Muhammad... and don't take Quran as the book of Allah, when a Muslim hears that such a people, are openly claiming that we want to change your religion, this should make any Muslim who has any love of Allah Almighty angry.<sup>47</sup>

According to al-Awlaki, the solution for Muslims living in the West was simple: perform *hijra* (migrate) to Muslim lands or engage in violent jihad:

Some will argue, 'I was born in the West; so where am I going?' Well if you are cognizant that the West is not your average land of the disbelievers and is actually fighting Islam in the media and battlefield front, then your obligation is to either fight them back with the sword or move to a Muslim country (if possible) and fight jihad.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, al-Awlaki argued that as Muslims they were individually obligated to engage in jihad: "So you need to do whatever you are capable of doing. It's a responsibility that's hanging on your neck, it's something that you owe to your Muslim brothers, you owe to the Ummah and you owe

<sup>44</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 2008, *Battle of the Hearts and Minds*: 17-18.

<sup>45</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 2002, *Lessons from the Companions Living as a Minority*: 7

<sup>46</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 2008, *Battle of the Hearts and Minds*: 4.

<sup>47</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 2008, *Battle of the Hearts and Minds*: 5.

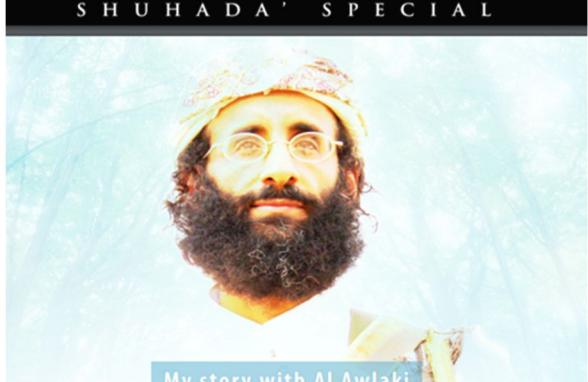
<sup>48</sup> Anwar Al-Awlaki, 2005, *Constants on the Path of Jihad by Shaykh Yusuf al 'Uyayree: Lecture series by Imam Anwar al Awlaki*: 8.

to Allah."<sup>49</sup> It was upon this notion that jihad is an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*) that he would attempt to jurisprudentially justify his calls for lone actor terrorism in the West declaring, "Jihad is still reaching the shores of Europe and America. Not from the outside, but from within. Jihad is not being imported but is being homegrown."<sup>50</sup> In perhaps his most infamous line, al-Awlaki said that "Jihad is becoming as American as apple pie and as British as afternoon tea. The palace of Pharaoh is being infiltrated."<sup>51</sup>

### Posthumous Appeal

It is useful to consider how AQAP eulogized al-Awlaki to present him as an iconic jihadi figure in death. The eulogy titled *My story with Al Awlaki*, is reportedly written by Shaykh Harith Al Nadari, a senior AQAP official.<sup>52</sup> Table 1 highlights how the eulogy uses al-Awlaki's life narrative to construct life events that are ultimately designed to project him as an outstanding charismatic leader.

Overall, *My story with Al Awlaki* focuses on reinforcing al-Awlaki's image as a warrior-scholar, a man who fused a deep jurisprudential understanding of Islam with living and fighting on the battlefield that included directing foreign terrorist operations. From its opening paragraph, Al Nadari emphasizes that al-Awlaki "wasn't speaking in a theorist academic way, but in a manner of someone who lived the *da'awah* and experienced its methods through practicing and wisdom."<sup>53</sup> He then praises al-Awlaki's credentials as a scholar and, again, highlights how al-Awlaki used this knowledge to engage in *dawa'ah* describing him as "the best Islamic preachers in English language."<sup>54</sup> It is at this point that the article focuses on how September 11 was somewhat of a turning point for al-Awlaki. The remainder of the article outlines how al-Awlaki focused on



**SHUHADA'S SPECIAL**

**My story with Al Awlaki**

Shaykh Harith Al Nadari

*The ignorant ones think that you have deceased ... while your boat sailed for Allah's sake and reached  
It is sufficient that when you are mentioned ... all the praiseworthy actions and loftiness are also mentioned*

**S**everal years before blessed raid of 911, I had met for the first time Shaykh Anwar Bin Nasar (Al-Awlaki) and may Allah have mercy on him. It was a Islamic conference that brought together a group of preachers, educators and youth of the Islamic awakening. The Shaykh's words were about the importance and methods of calling to the Almighty Allah. The Shaykh was speaking in a most direct academic way, but in a manner of someone who lived the *da'awah* and experienced its methods through practicing and wisdom. Hence, this is what had an impact on the audience and made them admire his personality.

1. Understanding of religion, Self, life and the universe.  
2. A testimony to his proficiency in the Qur'an that gives him a scholarly authorization to teach it

He traveled and returned years later when my relationship with him strengthened more than before. We met again in the same conference in the same masjid (al-Ansar masjid). He would sometimes deliver *al-Jum'ah* sermon and sometimes I would do it. Later, al-mumineen masjid was built next to his house so he used to pray there and offer *al-Jum'ah* sermon. He also invited me to give lectures and speeches at that masjid.

**Solid knowledge**  
Shaykh Anwar was aware of the fact that the authenticity of understanding<sup>1</sup> is in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, so he adhered to the Qur'an and its learning. In that regard, he received *ijazah*<sup>2</sup> in the recitation of the Noble Qur'an of the high level. He read *tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adem* by Ibn Kathir, *fi dildil al-Qur'an* by Sayyid Qutb. He was pursuing for the knowledge of the noble Hadith and other areas of Islamic tradition. His goal was to listen to Sahih al-Bukhari. He was given *ijazah*<sup>3</sup> in giving reference to the source. He received the jurisprudence at the hands of *Shara'i* scholars and he was given *ijazah* in *al-Shafi'i* jurisprudence. So the Shaykh's knowledge was coming from the primary sources to the great scholars. I have also been involved with him in the seeking of knowledge from some scholars, especially the knowledge of jurisprudence. He loved reading and he liked reading books of knowledge of purifying the self, in particular, *Madarij al-Saliheen* and *Zaad al-Ma'ad* by Ibn al-Qayyim and kept contemplating in them.

*Inspire Magazine feature of Anwar al-Awlaki Eulogy*

<sup>49</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 2008, *The story of the Bull.*: 7.

<sup>50</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 2010, *Anwar al-Awlaki: Western Jihad is Here to Stay*: 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Harith Al Nadari, 2012, "My story with Al Awlaki", *Inspire* (Issue 9): pp.8-12.

<sup>53</sup> Harith Al Nadari, 2012, "My story with Al Awlaki", *Inspire* (Issue 9): p.8.

<sup>54</sup> Harith Al Nadari, 2012, "My story with Al Awlaki", *Inspire* (Issue 9): p.9.

engaging in jihad and, despite threats and imprisonment, lived in Yemen to support AQAP's cause. This narrative is accompanied by images of al-Awlaki shooting an AK-47 and meeting with AQAP's leader at the time, Abu Baseer al-Wuhaishi. This construction and weaving of life events is a powerful way to reinforce the image and narrative al-Awlaki spent much of his life projecting as well as fuel posthumous charismatic appeal.

**Table 1: Anwar al-Awlaki Eulogy**

Six Life Events, CIP Framework	Excerpt from AQAP's eulogy for Anwar al-Awlaki: My Story with Anwar Al-Awlaki
Origination	Al-Awlaki has had a long commitment to Islam and proselytizing. "The Shaykh wasn't speaking in a theorist academic way, but in a manner of someone who lived the da'awah and experienced its methods through practicing and wisdom. Hence, this is what had an impact on the audience and made them admire his personality." <sup>55</sup>
Turning Point	September 11 focused al-Awlaki's activities on jihad. "After the blessed raid of Sept.11. There were lot of debates about who carried out these events. How those effects will reflect in the Muslim world and on the legality of those acts? I liked how Shaykh Anwar was dealing with this controversy and his answers to the questioners' inquiries about the legal ruling." <sup>56</sup>
Anchoring	Al-Awlaki is presented as a committed scholar of Islam. "Shaykh Anwar was aware of the fact that the authenticity of understanding is in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, so he adhered to the Quran and its learning." <sup>57</sup> Despite hardships, al-Awlaki remained committed to his values. "I met Shaykh Anwar in the day following his release and we talked about continuation of da'awah, about the mechanisms of work under our new circumstances and about the work's field. He was the same as I knew him before the prison. Nothing has changed of his principles and creed. In fact, he was more sacrificing, he had more courage, more determination and more firmness."
Analogous	Al-Awlaki's imprisonment is used to connect him to previous historical figures who were also imprisoned. "Imprisonment is of the trials that every holder of the da'awah faces. I remember that I asked the Shaykh, why the Muslim preachers are more likely to be in prison than other owners of Islamic projects? He replied by saying that it is so because their work is public or semi-public as they speak out what tyrants hate and don't accept. And prison is of Allah's decree and regardless of the precautions security measures someone has." <sup>58</sup>
Redemptive	Al-Awlaki was imprisoned but the experience is used to demonstrate how it increased his faith. "Bravery was drawn on his features. Expressing in words that he would not back down and would not give up even if imprisonment lasted long. Determination was his driving motto. He refused to soften his position when others did through taking the excuse of being under coercion. In the seclusion room, he divided his time between worship and reading. That allowed him to sail in a sea of folders of Tafseer and jurisprudence, fatwa and history." <sup>59</sup>
Contaminating	n/a

<sup>55</sup> Harith Al Nadari, 2012, "My story with Al Awlaki", *Inspire* (Issue 9): p.8.

<sup>56</sup> Harith Al Nadari, 2012, "My story with Al Awlaki", *Inspire* (Issue 9): p.9.

<sup>57</sup> Harith Al Nadari, 2012, "My story with Al Awlaki", *Inspire* (Issue 9): p.8.

<sup>58</sup> Harith Al Nadari, 2012, "My story with Al Awlaki", *Inspire* (Issue 9): p.10.

<sup>59</sup> Harith Al Nadari, 2012, "My story with Al Awlaki", *Inspire* (Issue 9): p.10.

### ***Samir Khan, 1985-2011: The Propagandist***

There are broad similarities in the general trajectories of Khan and al-Awlaki's lives. Both were sons of migrants who spent much of their formative years in the United States. Both worked as non-violent Islamist activists as young adults but would later join AQAP where they worked together on its English-language propaganda activities.

They would die together in a U.S. drone strike on September 30, 2011. Both men would have a profound influence on jihadist English-language propaganda but in significantly different ways. While al-Awlaki is the quintessential charismatic figure, the front man whose image is projected as a symbol of his message, Khan is the career propagandist working behind the scenes to not only construct and disseminate messaging for the cause but help establish networks, particularly online, that proved vital in the evolution of the jihadist threat in the West. From his 2001 blog *The Ignored Puzzle Pieces of Knowledge to Jihad Recollections* in 2009 and then co-editor of AQAP's *Inspire* in 2010 to his death, Khan was a key leader in western jihadist use of the internet to disseminate propaganda, including translations from Arabic to English, and creating online forums for recruitment, network building, and material support. Building on these foundations he would play a key role in the production of English language propaganda and, eventually, the fusion of operational guidelines into that messaging. In many ways Khan will always be both associated with and eclipsed by his more high-profile friend and mentor, al-Awlaki. Yet his impact and legacy are arguably just as significant given his role in making the jihadi cause accessible to English-speaking audiences and, going a step further, becoming the most impactful of the early pioneers of producing original jihadist English-language content.



*Inspire Magazine image of Samir Khan*

### Online Jihad Pioneer & Propagandist

Khan was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, before moving to New York at the age of seven and having a relatively average middle-class American upbringing. In 2001 he became involved in the Islamic Organization of North America (IONA) and engaged with members from other groups like the Islamic Thinkers Society around New York. Zelin describes the Islamic Thinkers Society as,

a rebranding of an offshoot of the British-based jihadi organization Al-Muhajiroun, that first expanded into New York in 2000. As such, the ITS is one of the longest-running organizations in the United States that sympathizes with the jihadi message — though it does so through nonviolent aims such as "street dawahs." That said, the ITS has made many connections to the global jihad over the years.<sup>60</sup>

Khan's blog, *The Ignored Puzzle Pieces of Knowledge*, which he ran from his parents' home in New York beginning in 2003 and continued after their move to North Carolina in 2004, was an online repository of jihadist battlefield videos, speeches, and propaganda especially from Iraq.<sup>61</sup> The English-language website also featured translations of this content from the original Arabic and was an important part of a nascent online network of American jihadist sympathizers. For example, the Islamic Networking Forum which hosted Khan's blog was linked to the early who's who of American jihadists such as Daniel Maldonado, who worked as an administrator, as well as Zachary Chesser, Tarek Mehanna, and Ahmad Abousamra who were active in these online networks.<sup>62</sup>

Upon moving to North Carolina, Khan reportedly contacted a lawyer to inquire about the parameters of his First Amendment protections.<sup>63</sup> Online, Khan would emerge as one of the most important hubs in English-speaking jihadi networks at that time.<sup>64</sup> However, in-person Khan was apparently awkward and shy, not especially popular at the local Islamic Center in Charlotte, and community members, including his father, had attempted to intervene worried

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<sup>60</sup> Aaron Zelin, 2001, "American Jihadi", *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/09/30/american-jihadi/>.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Moss, Souad Mekhennet, 2007, "An Internet jihad Aims at U.S. Viewers", *The New York Times* (October 15, 2007); Aaron Zelin, 2001, "American Jihadi", *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/09/30/american-jihadi/>.

<sup>62</sup> Aaron Zelin, 2001, "American Jihadi", *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/09/30/american-jihadi/>.

<sup>63</sup> Dina Temple-Raston, 2010, "American Editor Brings U.S. Savvy To Jihad Outreach", *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130439697v>.

<sup>64</sup> Indeed, it was during this time (in late 2006) that Khan came to the attention of the FBI. Contemporaneous internal FBI documents describe an individual who "became increasingly religious over time" and who "became a radicalizing influence for others." Communications from within the Charlotte FBI Field Office, made public via the Freedom of Information Act and provided to the authors by Jason Leopold.

about his online activism. In a 2007 interview with *The New York Times*, Khan hid his face while defending the blog saying:

If they come and capture me [U.S. law enforcement officials], they can come and capture me. But I am not doing anything which I feel that is illegal in that sense that I am not telling people to build bombs. I am not telling people how to do this and that. I am not telling people to meet such and such a person. But what I am telling people is the ideas behind the Quran and the Sunnah. The things which people ignore and hence this is why my blog is called *The Ignored Puzzle Pieces of Knowledge*.<sup>65</sup>



*Still image from 2007 New York Times Interview,*

© Michael Moss/The New York Times

The skills and lessons Khan had developed through his experiences to this point then seemed to culminate in his *Jihad Recollections* magazine. It is clear from Khan's postings and interviews that he thought about ways to best construct and disseminate propaganda to maximize its reach and impact, observing in an interview that he thought Al-Qaida and Malcolm X were "geniuses for having the ability to mold their ideology into simple yet influential messages that can reach the grass-roots level."<sup>66</sup> By 2009, Khan was seemingly no longer satisfied being just a distributor and moderator of jihadi content and turned his skills to producing jihadi propaganda that was specifically designed to speak to Western audiences. As stated in Issue 1 of *Jihad Recollections*:

We have acknowledged that the Arabic Jihadi media have surpassed the English community by light years. Many of our hard working brothers in the English Jihadi community – may Allah reward them with mountains of good deeds – usually limit themselves to translating works rather than developing their own. Henceforth, we have decided to take it upon ourselves to produce the first Jihadi Magazine in English.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Michael Moss, Emily B. Hager, 2007, "The Internet Jihadi", *The New York Times*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcrFHhyQmpA>

<sup>66</sup> Michael Moss, Souad Mekhennet, 2007, "An Internet jihad Aims at U.S. Viewers", *The New York Times* (October 15, 2007).

<sup>67</sup> "Editors", 2009, *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 1): 2.

Running for a total of four issues, *Jihad Recollections* is where Khan first fully showcases his approach to propaganda, a style that had been honed over a near decade of online activism. His writing style was colloquial and idiomatic while the contents of his magazines were filled with eye-catching titles and graphics. The contents of *Jihad Recollections* also spanned an eclectic range of topics. For example, its inaugural issue contained articles from "Getting in shape without weights"<sup>68</sup> and "Obama's Questionable Economic Stimulus Package"<sup>69</sup> to "Principles of Guerrilla Warfare"<sup>70</sup> and articles featuring extensive excerpts from Osama Bin Laden<sup>71</sup> and Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>72</sup> Its second issue opens by highlighting the response from both "the jihadi community as well as the non-jihadis" and offering a clarification presumably in response to criticism:



Front Covers of *Jihad Recollections*

...some were under the impression that we implied that this is the first Jihadi magazine. That would be incorrect. There have been quite a few before this was first published last month such as *Nida'ul Islam*, *Benefit of the Day*, and others. What we meant to say was that this is the first jihadi magazine of its kind as the focus of this magazine is very much different than what has been seen in the past English magazines. This is something that our readers will experience as time passes, *In Sha'Allah*.<sup>73</sup>

Regarding its contents, the first three issues of *Jihad Recollections* featured articles in sections such as "Politics & Economy", "Religion & Biography", "Strategy & Lessons", "Social", "Technology", and "Health". Reflecting its editor's clear interest in highlighting the importance of propaganda as well as the "art" and "science" of its practice, *Jihad Recollections* featured articles including "Revisiting the Global Jihad media effort"<sup>74</sup> and "Assessing the role and

<sup>68</sup> Ibn al-Mubarak, 2009, "Getting in shape without weights", *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 1): 22-26.

<sup>69</sup> Umm Ameenah, 2009, "Obama's Questionable Economic Stimulus Package", *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 1): 50-54.

<sup>70</sup> Abu Stratigiyah, 2009, "Principles of Guerrilla Warfare", *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 1): 48-49.

<sup>71</sup> Shaykh Usama Bin Laden, 2009, "Four Practical Steps to Expand the Global Jihad", *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 1): 27-28.

<sup>72</sup> Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri, Shaykh Nasir al-Fahd, 2009, "Have we forgotten who is America?", *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 1): 35-37.

<sup>73</sup> Editor, 2009, "Editors", *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 2): 2.

<sup>74</sup> Savvy Irhabi, 2009, "Revisiting the Global Jihad Media Effort", *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 2): 55-58.

influence of As-Sahab Media”<sup>75</sup> next to those which outlined the strategic and operational nuances of guerrilla warfare.<sup>76</sup> Its fourth and final issue was released in September 2009 and focused on the September 11 attacks with articles such as “The men behind 9/11 and the motives that bound them”<sup>77</sup> and “FBI’s John O’Neill: The great rival of Usama, killed on 9/11”.<sup>78</sup>

During this time, Khan was also active on Facebook building a network on the social media platform highlighting his role as more than just a propagandist producing content but a networker connecting like-minded people across the English-speaking jihadi milieu, especially Americans. As Zelin asserts, “Simply put, Khan was the node, connecting various networks within the online jihadi community.”<sup>79</sup> In the summer of 2009, Khan reportedly told peers at his local mosque that he wished to travel to Yemen.<sup>80</sup> By summer 2010, he had released AQAP’s first issue of *Inspire*.

When Khan emerged alongside al-Awlaki in Yemen as the co-editors of *Inspire* in 2010, it signaled the final and perhaps most impactful chapter of his life. Eight issues of *Inspire* would have all the signatures of Khan’s propaganda style on display: language that was flowing, colloquial and idiomatic, sometimes humorous,<sup>81</sup> often stern, but mostly striking the tone of a knowledgeable friend. Khan’s work naturally epitomized these traits with articles such as “I am proud to be a traitor to America”,<sup>82</sup> “The Central Issue”,<sup>83</sup> “The Egyptian”,<sup>84</sup> and his reflections on the death of Bin Laden titled “Sadness, Contentment, & Aspiration”.<sup>85</sup> Like *Jihad Recollections*, *Inspire* featured the speeches and writing of prominent jihadi figures but also the stories of young mujahideen. While less eclectic in its range of topics than *Jihad Recollections*, *Inspire* featured articles that provided the historical precedence,<sup>86</sup> jurisprudential justification,<sup>87</sup> and strategic rationale<sup>88</sup> for engaging in *jihad*. Even to the casual observer, the similarities between *Jihad Recollections* and *Inspire* are clear.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibn al-Mubarak, 2009, “Assessing the role and influence of As-Sahab Media”, *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 3): 36-37.

<sup>76</sup> For example, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Muqrin, 2009, “Operational Objectives of Guerrilla Wars”, *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 3): 18.

<sup>77</sup> Abu ‘Abdullah As-Sayf Jones, 2009, “The men behind 9/11 and the motives that bound them”, *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 4): 39-48.

<sup>78</sup> Abu Risaas, 2009, “FBI’s John O’Neill: The great rival of Usama, killed on 9/11”, *Jihad Recollections* (Issue 4): 20.

<sup>79</sup> Aaron Zelin, 2001, “American Jihadi”, *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/09/30/american-jihadi/>.

<sup>80</sup> Dina Temple-Raston, 2010, “Grand Jury Focuses on N.C. Man Tied To Jihad Magazine”, *NPR* (August 18, 2010). <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129263809>.

<sup>81</sup> For example, *Inspire* would have humorous ads with the line “This ad is brought to you by A Cold Diss” (*Inspire*, issue 4, p.51).

<sup>82</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, “I am proud to be a traitor to America”, *Inspire* (Issue 2): 45-49.

<sup>83</sup> Samir Khan, 2011, “The Central Issue”, *Inspire* (Issue 4): 12-16.

<sup>84</sup> Samir Khan, 2011, “The Egyptian”, *Inspire* (Issue 5): 45-46.

<sup>85</sup> Samir Khan, 2011, “Sadness, Contentment, & Aspiration”, *Inspire* (Issue 6): 47-50.

<sup>86</sup> Abu Mus’ab Al-Suri, 2011, “The jihadi Experiences: The Military Theory of Open Fronts”, *Inspire* (Issue 4): 31-35.

<sup>87</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 2011, “Targeting the populations of countries that are at war with the Muslims”, *Inspire*, Issue 8: 40-47; Samir Khan, 2011, “The Central Issue”, *Inspire* (Issue 4): 12-16.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Abu Musab Al-Suri, 2010, “The Jihadi Experiences: The Schools of Jihad”, *Inspire* (Issue 1): 48-53.

Yet in terms of reach, impact, and retention in the public memory, *Inspire* eclipsed all its predecessors or peers. Perhaps only the Islamic State's *Dabiq* has achieved a similar level of recognition. *Inspire*'s global platform as the flagship jihadi English-language magazine of al-Qaida's affiliate in Yemen, which was by now arguably the standout affiliate even outshining al-Qaida's core, certainly helped. It is useful to remember, however, that al-Qaida had previously tried to promote Adam Gadahn as its English-language spokesman to reach-out to Western audiences which largely failed. Two factors were arguably more decisive in *Inspire*'s greater notoriety. First was the central role that al-Awlaki played as front man, co-editor, and frequent feature in *Inspire*'s pages. Articles featuring or by al-Awlaki included "The New Mardin Declaration",<sup>89</sup> "Why did I choose al Qaeda?",<sup>90</sup> and "Targeting the populations of countries that are at war with the Muslims."<sup>91</sup> Second was *Inspire*'s unequivocal calls for Muslims living in the West to engage in terrorism at home whilst providing its readers with the technical and operational know-how to act in its recurring "Open Source Jihad" section (e.g. "Make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom").<sup>92</sup> The magazine's profile seemed to grow with each issue, especially as its contents and editors were linked to terrorist plots and attacks in the West.

Khan's article "I am proud to be a traitor to America"<sup>93</sup> provides a useful opportunity to apply the CIP Framework to Khan's autobiographical account of his reasons for becoming an activist in America and then joining al-Qaida (see Table 2). The article opens with Khan talking about his faith taking "a 180-degree turn" resulting in him deciding "to take up the pen and write out my thoughts and feelings regarding America's cowboy behavior in the Islamic lands."<sup>94</sup> While acknowledging that he strategically tried to stay within America's laws, he asserts that the reason he left for Yemen was to place himself above them:

I knew that I had to stay under the guidelines of the laws regarding freedom of speech, but at the same time, I knew the real truth wouldn't be able to reach the masses unless and until I was above the law.<sup>95</sup>

Throughout the article, Khan describes a journey of frequent obstacles and challenges that all were ultimately overcome by focusing on the fundamentals of his faith. The redemptive features of his story, centrally being an American Muslim who betrays his country for loyalty to his

<sup>89</sup> Shaykh Anwar al-Awlaki, 2010, "The New Mardin Declaration", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 33-40.

<sup>90</sup> Shaykh Anwar al-Awlaki, 2011, "Why did I choose Al Qaeda?" *Inspire* (Issue 4): 48-50.

<sup>91</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 2011, "Targeting the populations of countries that are at war with the Muslims", *Inspire*, Issue 8: 40-47.

<sup>92</sup> The AQ Chef, 2010, "Make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom", *Inspire* (Issue 1): 33-40.

<sup>93</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 45-49.

<sup>94</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 46.

<sup>95</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 46.

religion, seems to be designed to parallel the broader redemptive potential for the *ummah* if it is willing to violently struggle.<sup>96</sup> Khan's colloquial and idiomatic style is perhaps most obvious when he is emphasizing a particularly central point to his argument. For example, when he praises the Fort Hood and Times Square attackers:

America has a long history of massacring and subjugating Muslims and yet the American regime is still scratching its head on the question: why did Usama bin Ladin attack us? America, take a hint for once: maybe you did something. It should then come as no surprise that the Muslims in your midst – like Nidal Hassan, Faisal Shahzad, and others – became traitors of your state due to your conduct.<sup>97</sup>

The article finishes in similar style with Khan seeking to leverage existential angst amongst his Western based audiences declaring: "We pledge to wage jihad for the rest of our lives until either we implant Islam all over the world or meet our Lord as bearers of Islam. And how reputable, adventurous and pleasurable is such a life compared to those who remain sitting, working from nine to five?"<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 47.

<sup>97</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 48.

<sup>98</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 49.

**Table 2: Samir Khan**

<b>Six Life Events, CIP Framework</b>	<b>Excerpts from Khan's "I am proud to be a traitor"</b>
Origination	<p>"After my faith took a 180-degree turn, I knew I could no longer reside in America as a compliant citizen."<sup>99</sup></p> <p>"The core of my being is really based on religious convictions in the absence of politics."<sup>100</sup></p>
Turning Point	<p>"At that moment, I realized that my entire life would be changed by this one decision of mines. I was about to officially become a traitor of the country I grew up in for most of my life."<sup>101</sup></p>
Anchoring	<p>"My faith and convictions gave me strength to lambast the greatest tyrant of our time."<sup>102</sup> "Islam has the answer to life's problems and it is what bonds humanity together for the good."<sup>103</sup></p>
Analogous	<p>"I knew I had to rush out of America before the FBI got me in for a flimsy excuse as they have done to individuals like Tariq Mehanna."<sup>104</sup></p> <p>"I am acutely aware that body parts have to be torn apart, skulls have to be crushed and blood has to be spilled in order for this to be a reality. Anyone who says otherwise is an individual who is not prepared to make sacrifices that heroes and champions make."<sup>105</sup></p>
Redemptive	<p>"It's just absolutely enthralling to know that guerrilla's can fight off global superpowers with the bare minimum resulting in great enemy losses, drainage of the enemy's economy and a rising popular support for the mujahidin."<sup>106</sup></p> <p><u>"How could I become a traitor to myself by throwing away this holy odyssey?"</u><sup>107</sup></p>
Contaminating	<p>"I knew that I had to stay under the guidelines of the laws regarding freedom of speech, but at the same time, I knew the real truth wouldn't be able to reach the masses unless and until I was above the law."<sup>108</sup></p>

<sup>99</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 47.

<sup>100</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 48.

<sup>101</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 47.

<sup>102</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 47.

<sup>103</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 49.

<sup>104</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 47.

<sup>105</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 47.

<sup>106</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 48.

<sup>107</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 48.

<sup>108</sup> Samir Khan, 2010, "I am proud to be a traitor to America", *Inspire* (Issue 2): 46.

### Posthumous Appeal

When *Inspire*'s American editors were both listed as "global terrorists" by the U.S. government, although only al-Awlaki was placed on a list for targeting, it further boosted their profiles. As had been the case ever since Khan joined al-Awlaki in AQAP, his status was significantly amplified by his association with al-Awlaki. When, on September 30, 2011, both men were killed in a U.S. drone strike, it helped to secure that link to al-Awlaki in the collective imagination.<sup>109</sup> Inevitably, there was a photo of Khan and al-Awlaki together. Table 3 outlines how Khan's eulogy leverages six types of life events to project him as an outstanding ideological leader. The recurring themes in Khan's eulogy are core traits of piety and humility, a lifelong commitment to Islamic values, and a journey characterized by hardship and toil for the sake of *jihad*. The imagery used throughout the article presents a man who was seemingly always smiling while engaged in jihad. The sense that emerges from the eulogy is of a child of the West, committed to the propaganda struggle at the heart of the jihadi war, and a martyr for the cause.



Abu Yazeed  
SAMIR KHAN:  
THE FACE OF JOY

*Samir Khan Eulogy from Inspire Magazine*

them. He came because his faith brought him. He came because he knew he had a religiously required duty.

I asked him once, why did he choose the name "Abu Shidah" which was among his nicknames. He explained he chose it because it comes from the noun *Shidah*, meaning harshness. Emphasizing that it is aimed at the disbelievers, as I understood him, he did not want to use any of his nicknames in order to terrify the enemies of Islam. This is not just a mere nickname. His actions were a confirmation for this harshness against the *Kuffar*. I knew that when I watched an interview that were taken with him back in America. He said in:

another attribute I admire was his dislike of deviated sects; here, I have to clarify what I mean by deviated sects. This does not mean different sects. This means that they have the same purpose. This means sects that have separated on fixed principle of *Sharia*. Meaning that, they have made up for themselves foundations that are different from the fixed foundations of Islam. Because these things are not correct, they are the issues of *Aqeedah*, Faith, Creed.

However, he did advise sincerely those who took other than the path of jihad.

remember this particular one that came from a bedouin brother. When this brother was told the news of the coming of Samir from America, he said "What is Allah's purpose of the *Noor* [Christians] are performing jihad with us? Another brother would ask him to laugh in English! The mujahideen exchanged that love with him. They even considered him a motivation and an inspiration for them since they consider him to support their cause. Some of them realized that this cause is greater than what they used to think. One brother said:

"Indeed, it is an international cause!" He was in other words, so ardent to their mujahideen. Likewise are the brothers in the west who engage in jihad through their action. They give the mujahideen happiness when the mujahideen hear that their enemy is being stabbed in the back. Even though Arabic wasn't his mother tongue he memorized a lot of the Holy Qur'an. His recitation of the Qur'an was so beautiful that one brother recited it for hours. I remember that whenever he led a prayer, he would recite a Surah that is related to the mujahideen situation. Chapters that pertain to fighting in Allah's cause, martyrdom in Allah's cause. His recitation of *Surah Alomaf* was the most repeated one.

When we talked about the plight of the Muslims in America, he would often tell me how he wished that every brother coming from the West,

it: "The American occupiers, they are disbelievers and every disbeliever will go to hell fire according to the book of Allah." After being asked how does he feel living in an American community that is sending troops to Iraq, he replied: "And when they return to their families, whatever happens to their sons and daughters is not of my concern, because originally, they are disbelievers, and they are disbelievers if they do not accept Islam, and if they die upon that especially when they are in the army, then, they are disbelievers. Even when I met him, I would realize an improvement in his Arabic. Over the time he stayed, he progressed a lot in the Arabic language to the point that you couldn't easily tell if he was an English speaking brother. One brother told me that he found in Samir a chance to practice his English, so he once sent him a message in English but the brother was surprised when Samir replied in Arabic.

He enjoyed staying outdoors, he would be around the mujahideen. He had many funny moments with them. I

This is an excellent example of *Bara* [disavowal from the disbelievers] and this is how it is practiced. His

*Samir Khan Eulogy from Inspire Magazine*

Khan may not have the profile of al-Awlaki but his contributions to advancements in jihadist English-language propaganda, and the jihadist threat in the West more broadly, are arguably just as significant. After all, Khan emerged during a time when English speaking audiences were mostly a second thought for jihadist groups worthy only of some translated materials but certainly not a concerted, strategic effort. Now, it is common for jihadist groups, especially those aligned with al-Qaida or the Islamic State, to specifically cater to English-speaking audiences and often via an online magazine. Khan's legacy is particularly evident in that

<sup>109</sup> Abu Yazeed, "Samir Khan: The Face of Joy", *Inspire* (Issue 9): 14-19.

format, from the Taliban in Khurasan's *Azan*,<sup>110</sup> As-Sashab's *Resurgence*, the Mujahideen of Shaam's *Al-Risalah* and, of course, the Islamic State's *Dabiq* and *Rumiyyah*<sup>111</sup> where another American, experienced in much of the same online networks, would be central.

**Table 3: Samir Khan eulogy**

Six Life Events, CIP Framework	Excerpt from AQAP's eulogy for Samir Khan: "Samir Khan: The Face of Joy"
Origination	"His contemporary tool of da'awah [Inspire] proved very effective; it was alone a massive front in confronting the intellectual war against Islam. His weapons to defend Islam were very simple; a laptop and a camera. However, he was loaded with ammunition. That ammunition was the creed of jihad in Allah's path." <sup>112</sup>
Turning Point	"I was excited to know his story, knowing that he emigrated from America, " the land of dreams". The land that people of dunya rush into and wish to be there. In America - being the young man he was- he had everything that young men needed and required. Despite all of it, he left life of comfort and ease and moved in a country where people of dunya run away out of it." <sup>113</sup>
Anchoring	"His experience in jihad and ribat made him humble with his brothers. His knowledge of the religion was solid and extensive. He proved that knowledge is for acting upon. He gave blood, sweat and tears for the sake of Allah." <sup>114</sup>
Analogous	"He was a role model for the mujahideen and will forever reside in our hearts as such." <sup>115</sup>
Redemptive	"When we talked about the plight of the Muslims in America, he would often tell me how he wished that every brother coming from the West, especially America, had partaken in jihad inside that country. He explained that attacking the enemy in their backyard is one of the best ways to help the jihad. It would therefore help the cause of Islam greatly which he had known from his personal experience." <sup>116</sup>
Contaminating	n/a

<sup>110</sup> For an analysis see Haroro J. Ingram, 2015, "An analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's *Azan* (Issues 1-5)", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(7): 560-79.

<sup>111</sup> For more see Stuart Macdonald & Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, 2021, "Visual Jihad: Constructing the 'Good Muslim' in Online Jihadist Magazines", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44(5): 363-386; Haroro J. Ingram, 2018, "Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-17: Trends & implications for CT-CVE strategic communications", *International Center for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague*. <https://icct.nl/publication/islamic-states-english-language-magazines-2014-2017-trends-implications-for-ct-cve-strategic-communications/>.

<sup>112</sup> Abu Yazeed, "Samir Khan: The Face of Joy", *Inspire* (Issue 9): 15.

<sup>113</sup> Abu Yazeed, "Samir Khan: The Face of Joy", *Inspire* (Issue 9): 15.

<sup>114</sup> Abu Yazeed, "Samir Khan: The Face of Joy", *Inspire* (Issue 9): 15.

<sup>115</sup> Abu Yazeed, "Samir Khan: The Face of Joy", *Inspire* (Issue 9): 19.

<sup>116</sup> Abu Yazeed, "Samir Khan: The Face of Joy", *Inspire* (Issue 9): 16-17.

### **Ahmad Abousamra, 1981-2017: The Technocrat**

At the time of his reported death in 2017, Ahmad Abousamra (also known by his alias, Abu Sulayman ash-Shami), had been under indictment in the District of Massachusetts for eight years, and had been listed by Federal Bureau of Investigation as a 'Most Wanted Terrorist' with a \$50,000 reward for information since 2013.<sup>117</sup> How this French born, Syrian-American dual citizen raised in the suburbs of Boston became one of the most prominent English language propagandists within the Islamic State's foreign language media department is a clear testament to the pragmatic leadership qualities that Abousamra embodied in life. However, his impact was arguably only brought into view posthumously, and through an analysis of these periods of Abousamra's life and key narrative events, his role as a technocrat in the Islamic State's propaganda apparatus will be made clear.

The narrative of Ahmad Abousamra can be bifurcated neatly into two distinct periods. First, his role as a leader and ideologue within a small group of friends and co-conspirators in the United States in the early 2000s, characterized by an increasing zeal and failed attempts to join far-flung foreign terrorist organizations in the wake of September 11. Second, his travel to Syria in 2006, which



*Tarek Mehanna leaving federal court in Boston*

ultimately led to his rise to the upper echelons of the Islamic State's Media Department. The core biographical details of Ahmad Abousamra's life in the United States have been well-documented in previous Program on Extremism studies, public reporting, and court records from the prosecution of Tarek Mehanna – who was charged (along with Abousamra *in absentia*) and convicted on a range of terror offences in 2012.<sup>118</sup> The son of a Muslim Brotherhood-linked

<sup>117</sup> "Wanted Fugitive Ahmad Abousamra Added to the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists List." 2013. FBI. December 18, 2013. <https://www.fbi.gov/boston/press-releases/2013/wanted-fugitive-ahmad-abousamra-added-to-the-fbis-most-wanted-terrorists-list>.

<sup>118</sup> The pair were charged in a ten-count indictment with providing and conspiring to provide material support to terrorists, conspiracy to kill in a foreign country, conspiracy to provide false information to law enforcement, and a number of false statements counts. See: Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, 2018, *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, (February 2018).

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>; Karen Anderson, 2014. "FBI on Mass. Terror Suspect: 'Don't Know Where He Is, What He's Doing'." WCVB. October 15, 2014.

<http://www.wcvb.com/article/fbi-onmass-terror-suspect-don-t-know-where-he-is-what-he-sdoing/8209979>; "Indictment." 2009. USA v. Tarek Mehanna and Ahmad Abousamra. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 09-CR-10017.; "Second Superseding Indictment." 2010. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna and Ahmad Abousamra*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.; "Second Superseding Indictment." 2010.

activist who moved the family from France to Boston early in Abousamra's life, he attended Xaverian Brothers Catholic High School, but he reportedly transferred before graduation due to a ban on male students growing beards.<sup>119</sup>

While it is not clear precisely when Abousamra embraced the ideological and theological tenants of jihadism that would characterize his later life, the body of evidence available suggests his more extreme beliefs crystallized prior to 9/11, with research produced after his travel overseas suggesting that he began watching propaganda videos produced by al-Qaida as early as 1996, when he was 15.<sup>120</sup> By 2001, a small circle of individuals led by Abousamra and including Boston residents Tarek Mehanna and Kareem Abuzahra began to meet regularly, discussing their views on religion, global events, and on violent jihad.<sup>121</sup> Within this Massachusetts-based group, Abousamra was identified as the "most outspoken, charismatic and vehement of the three."<sup>122</sup> Over time, this group grew to include Hassan Masood, the nephew of Lashkhar-e-Taiba founder Hafiz Muhammad Saeed who would later provide Abousamra with logistical support for his travel attempts to Pakistan.<sup>123</sup> Connections also developed between this group and Daniel Maldonado, who would travel to Somalia alongside another American, Omar Hammami, in 2006 to receive military training from Al-Shabaab.<sup>124</sup> Evidence suggests that Abousamra exerted



*Kareem Abuzahra testifying in federal court in Boston, 2011.*

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*United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna and Ahmad Abousamra.* United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Jytte Klausen, 2016, *A Behavioral Study of the Radicalization Trajectories of American "Homegrown" Al Qaeda-Inspired Terrorist Offenders*, National Institute of Justice, (August 2016). <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/behavioral-study-radicalization-trajectories-american-homegrown-al>.

<sup>121</sup> "Statement of Relevant Offense Conduct." *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna.* United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>122</sup> "Defendant's Memorandum on the Appropriate Sentence under 18 U.S.C. §§ 3553 AND 3661." 2012. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna.* United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>123</sup> Milton J. Valencia and Martin Finucane, 2014. "Witness says Mehanna sought terror training." Boston Globe. November 11, 2011. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2011/11/15/witness-says-mehanna-sought-terror-training/PDpXwQ4posdVK8OqXDgynJ/story.html>; "Transcript of Jury Trial Day Eight." 2011. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna.* United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>124</sup> Both Daniel Maldonado and Hassan Masood testified in the trial against Tarek Mehanna and spoke at length about the nature of the relationship between these men and Abousamra. Maldonado was sentenced in 2007 to 10 years in prison for his receipt of military training by a foreign terrorist organization. See: "U.S. Citizen Sentenced to Prison for Receiving Military Training from a Terrorist Organization." 2007. Department of Justice Press Release. July 20.

[https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2007/july/07\\_nsd\\_531.html](https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2007/july/07_nsd_531.html); Andrea Elliott, 2010. "The Jihadist Next Door." *The New York Times Magazine.* <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/magazine/31Jihadist-t.html>.

significant influence and authority over the core members of this group, with Abousamra's attitude described by Tarek Mehanna's brother Tamer as a combination of "a defiance of authority with a strong sense of assertion," noting that "it wasn't easy to change his mind. He had endurance and would wear you down."<sup>125</sup>

Witness testimony suggests that the September 11 attacks and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan served as significant drivers of Abousamra's fervor and zeal.<sup>126</sup> Watching the news reports that day in a Dunkin Donuts, Mehanna and Abousamra "fought hard to suppress their smiles."<sup>127</sup> As the group's conversations online and offline continued in the wake of 9/11,

Abousamra argued at length that the September 11 attacks were justified due to American interference in the Muslim world, that the World Trade Center was a legitimate target and that the democratic system of America meant that all Americans supported the government and were fair targets.<sup>128</sup> He also criticized scholars of Saudi Arabia, declaring them apostates for their refusal to denounce the rulers of Saudi Arabia and support jihad.<sup>129</sup> In this time period, Abousamra's developed views characterized as "extreme" by co-conspirators who themselves had radicalized alongside Abousamra and who would each seek out similar opportunities in the years to come to join the global jihad.<sup>130</sup> Individuals in his circle stated that it "almost seemed as if there was no -- it was as if there were no limits in the things that he said or the views that he could have."<sup>131</sup> Indeed, in private conversations Mehanna and Abuzahra expressed concerns regarding Abousamra's extreme views over "who it is halal [proper] to kill" and expressed frustration that he was not trying to persuade people through Islam anymore.<sup>132</sup> Of particular note were Abousamra's far more expansive views on the applicability of suicide bombings, the targeting of women and children, and the invocation of takfir.<sup>133</sup>

While Abousamra was clearly seeking to exert a degree of leadership and authority over his peers in this domestic cell through his dogmatism, there are also clear signs of Abousamra's perseverance and flexibility in the midst of a rapidly shifting extremist landscape in the months

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<sup>125</sup> Michael May, 2012, "Keyboard Jihadist?" May 14, 2012. <https://prospect.org/environment/keyboard-jihadist/>.

<sup>126</sup> "Transcript of Jury Trial Day Eight." 2011. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>127</sup> "Brief for the United States." *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. 2013. Case: 12-1461.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Transcript of Jury Trial Day Fourteen." 2011. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>131</sup> Transcript of Jury Trial Day Ten." 2011. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

and years following the invasion of Afghanistan and the beginning of the War on Terror. As Abousamra's views on jihad came into focus, his debates with close friends morphed into continued drawn-out attempts to travel overseas to engage in what he viewed to be a religious obligation to defend Muslim countries against invading armies.<sup>134</sup> Twice in 2002, Abousamra traveled to Pakistan in the hopes of receiving military training, with the ultimate goal of entering into Afghanistan and engaging in attacks against U.S. and allied forces in the region.<sup>135</sup> On both occasions, he was unable to achieve his goal – with reports suggesting he sought out training camps run by the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba, but was rejected from both due to his inexperience and ethnicity.<sup>136</sup> Abousamra returned to the United States with only a singular contact, an individual named Abdulmajid, who advised him (in what would later become a central theme of the Islamic State's English language propaganda) to instead try to commit a terror attack at home with whatever was available to him.<sup>137</sup>

Returning home frustrated in December 2002, Abousamra began discussing plans with Mehanna and Abuzahra for a domestic terror attack in earnest. Targets ranged from a Boston-area mall, to then-Attorney General John Ashcroft or then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice (whom they viewed as responsible for the war in Iraq) to an attack on Hanscom Air Force Base.<sup>138</sup> After the group failed to obtain firearms from Daniel Maldonado, they concluded that it was their obligation to "go and defend [their] faith" in Iraq.<sup>139</sup> In furtherance of his goal, Abousamra traveled to Sacramento in 2003 to meet Jason Pippin, whom he had communicated with online in jihadist forums such as Clear Guidance and At-Tibyan Publications since at least 2001.<sup>140</sup> Abousamra told Pippin he wanted to go to Yemen to receive paramilitary training so that he could then travel to Iraq and join the fight against American forces.<sup>141</sup> Pippin, a former traveler himself who had received military training from LeT in Pakistan in 1996 as well as traveled to Yemen in search of places to engage in Arabic and Islamic Studies,<sup>142</sup> "told Abousamra how best to enter Yemen" and advised him to say that he intended

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Mark Clayton, 2009. "How FBI traced Tarek Mehanna in his quest to become a jihadi." *The Christian Science Monitor*. October 22, 2009. <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2009/1022/p02s10-usju.html>.

<sup>137</sup> "Brief for the United States." *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. 2013. Case: 12-1461.

<sup>138</sup> "Statement of Relevant Offense Conduct." *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>139</sup> "Brief for the United States." *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. 2013. Case: 12-1461.

<sup>140</sup> Transcript of Jury Trial Day Fifteen." 2011. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>141</sup> "Brief for the United States." *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. 2013. Case: 12-1461.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

to visit the Dar al-Mustafa school.<sup>143</sup> Pippin proposed this “cover story” because this school was reportedly “diametrically opposed to the ideology of the Salafi-Jihadis.”<sup>144</sup>

In February 2004, Abousamra, Mehanna and Abuzahra finalized their preparation and traveled to Yemen together in search of training camps as described to Abousamra by Pippin.<sup>145</sup> However, as with previous attempts by Abousamra, this trip also ended in disappointment. Abuzahra returned to the United States before the final leg of their trip from the United Arab Emirates to Yemen, and both Abousamra and Mehanna left Yemen within a week, after being informed by local contacts they made that “all that stuff [i.e., the training camps] is gone ever since the planes hit the twin towers.”<sup>146</sup> While Mehanna returned to the United States, Abousamra continued on undeterred, traveling to Jordan before entering into Iraq and eventually reaching Fallujah.<sup>147</sup> Upon his return to the United States, Abousamra described to his close friend Ali Aboubakr his frustration regarding his failure to join the insurgency in Fallujah, stating he:

had gone to Fallujah, and he explicitly told me that he had gone there to participate in fighting, or tried to. He described the man that he had met with, and he even -- he showed me a picture of this man. And the man had turned him away because he had not -- he told me that he turned him away because he was American. And he stayed there for -- from what I recall from the conversation, he said he had stayed there for two weeks, until somebody could arrange a way out for him.<sup>148</sup>

Even before his successful travel, Abousamra’ private conversations seem to foreshadow his path to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Evidence presented at the trial of Tarek Mehanna

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<sup>143</sup> Stewart Bell, 2016. “Toronto man who has been de-radicalizing Canadian terrorists being deported to the U.S.” National Post. November 27, 2016. <https://nationalpost.com/news/toronto-man-who-has-been-de-radicalizing-canadian-terrorists-being-deported-to-the-u-s>; “Brief for the United States.” *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. 2013. Case: 12-1461.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*; “Government’s Motion for Detention.” 2009. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>146</sup> “Brief for the United States.” *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. 2013. Case: 12-1461.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*; The timeline set forth by the government asserts that Abousamra spent roughly two weeks in Fallujah before departing. After this, he returned to Jordan (through which he had originally traveled on his way to Iraq), where he stayed from roughly February 28 until the middle of April 2004. He then entered Syria, where he stayed until his return to Boston in 2004. There are no substantive details provided regarding Abousamra’s activities. When Abousamra returned from Syria in 2004, he was questioned as to his travel and admitted to visiting Mukalla, Yemen; Amman, Jordan; as well as Aleppo, Syria, but failed to disclose his travel to Fallujah, Iraq. In 2006, he was questioned by CBP when returning from Syria early in 2006, and claimed he had traveled to Baghdad for two weeks in 2004 to seek employment as a translator, before developing a lung infection and returning home. For a detailed readout of Abousamra’s travel, See: Transcript of Jury Trial Day Eleven.” 2011. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>148</sup> Transcript of Jury Trial Day Eight.” 2011. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*; Additional statements put forth in the course of the trial suggest that Abousamra was initially viewed with suspicion due to his status as an American.

reveals a deep admiration for then-leader of al-Qaida in Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, whose views on *takfir* and the targeting of civilians reflected his own. Describing what was then the most recent public statement by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abousamra messaged Mehanna claiming “i don't understand why our fathers' generation is so pessimistic regarding the j [jihad] situation in the world. ... When everything indicates otherwise. ... in the tape he says he knew mr. z personally and knew him to be only a good man.”<sup>149</sup> Following the death of Zarqawi, Abousamra expressed a deep sense of loss and sadness, stating that,

Man, I'm very sad. ... Like, his voice... no we can't hear it anymore...They made the man into a giant of history. ... Maybe before, some people didn't respect him due to him still being alive. ... Although they supported him in general. ... Now his words have been made with blood. ... i'm not joking, i'm really sad... ... unlike abhjr or abhfs... we heard his tapes regularly ... full of emotions ... to the point that it felt like you knew the man personally ... and then this man who you felt like was you bst frnd ... suddenly murdered.

Despite the authority reportedly held by Abousamra within his domestic social circle, it was in fact Mehanna who the government suggests played a far more active and prominent role in early jihadist propaganda efforts.<sup>150</sup> In fact, in the wake of the failed Yemen trip, it was Mehanna who seems to have “developed this charismatic persona empowered largely because of his knowledge, because he had the credibility, because people knew about his prior failed campaign to Yemen in which he had collaborated with some of the Tibyan Publications folks.”<sup>151</sup>

By 2004, At-Tibyan Publications, the “premier English language Salafi-Jihadi web forum” was a critical facet of al-Qaida’s early efforts to produce their own propaganda.<sup>152</sup> Through his work, Mehanna rose quickly as a translator and moderator on the password-protected forum, and “proved invaluable” to At-Tibyan’s efforts to produce English-language versions of al-Qaida propaganda.<sup>153</sup> Mehanna’s work, including the translation of such documents as “39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad” was done with the stated belief that “the best recruitment tool

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<sup>149</sup> “Government’s Motion for Detention.” 2009. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>150</sup> “Brief for the United States.” *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. 2013. Case: 12-1461.

<sup>151</sup> “Transcript of Disposition.” *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

was to distribute inspirational media depicting great suffering, and it would "increase AQ [al Qa'ida] membership a billionfold."<sup>154</sup>

Abousamra was questioned by the FBI on December 12, 2006, following his return from Iraq. According to witnesses who spoke to him following this interview, "he kept muttering an Arabic phrase that meant 'this is the decree of God,' and he kept just saying that over and over again."<sup>155</sup> While this questioning undoubtedly spurred Abousamra's flight to Syria barely two weeks later, it is unclear at present whether Abousamra would have attempted yet another trip overseas to join a jihadist group were it not for this intervention. However, private messages from earlier in 2006 show Abousamra's increasing dissatisfaction with life in America; claiming "i [sic] just hate this stupid kufr land ... i hate being surrounded by kaafirs."<sup>156</sup> Abousamra left the United States shortly thereafter, on December 26, 2006, flying from Boston, Massachusetts, to Syria via London. He would not return to the United States again, and his role as an influential propagandist would only grow from this point forward.

### Abousamra in Iraq and Syria

After fleeing the United States amidst increasing law enforcement scrutiny, Abousamra arrived in Syria and largely disappeared from public view. Six years passed between Abousamra's departure to Syria and his co-conspirator Tarek Mehanna's sentencing, with no substantive updates provided by the U.S. government until 2012, when a \$50,000 reward was offered for



*Unreleased, undated photo of Abousamra Tabqa Dam, near Raqqa. Photo made public by Daniel Rainieri.*

<sup>154</sup> "Second Superseding Indictment." 2010. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna and Ahmad Abousamra*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

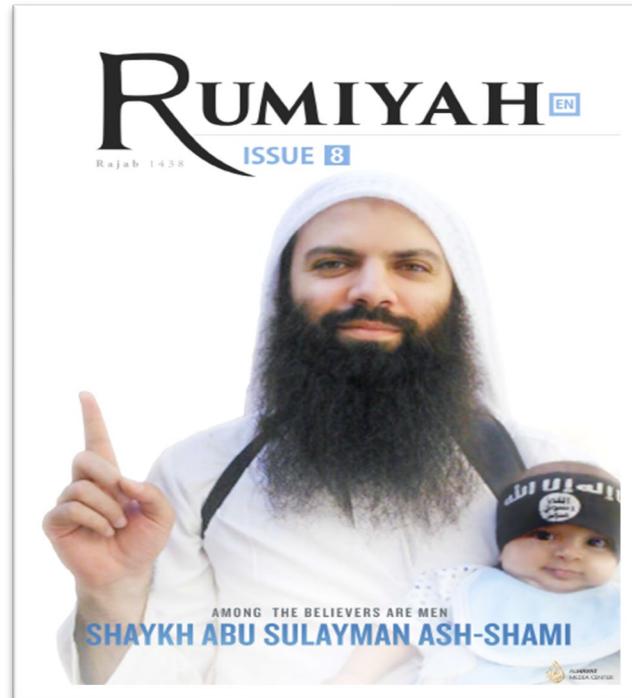
<sup>155</sup> Transcript of Jury Trial Day Eight." 2011. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. Additional statements put forth in the course of the trial suggest that Abousamra was initially viewed with suspicion due to his status as an American.

<sup>156</sup> "Government's Motion for Detention." 2009. *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO.

information leading to his arrest.<sup>157</sup> Abousamra was added to the FBI's 'Most Wanted Terrorists' list in 2013, where he remains to this day.<sup>158</sup>

Much of Abousamra's life events after his arrival in Syria are shrouded in mystery, with his eulogy in the eighth issue of the Islamic State's official magazine publication, *Rumiyah*, serving as the most comprehensive telling of his life narrative noting, of course, that these eulogies are propaganda.<sup>159</sup> Until Abousamra's photograph and full name appeared in the April 2017 release lionizing his achievements, there had been only vague declarations from journalists in 2014 that he "could be using computer science skills he learned in Massachusetts" to help the Islamic State – with the frank admission from the FBI

that they "have no idea...we don't know where he is or what he is doing."<sup>160</sup>



Rumiyah Issue 8 Cover featuring Abousamra

As such, while the declarations of the Islamic State should be viewed with circumspection, there is immense value in analyzing the portrayal of Abousamra not simply as a jihadist propagandist alongside his mentor, the legendary propagandist Abu Muhammad al Furqan, but as a "warrior" who sought martyrdom on the battlefield.<sup>161</sup> The eulogy begins by identifying Abousamra – under his alias Abu Sulayman ash-Shami – as a knowledge seeker from "among a rare class of scholars" and one who embodied the tenants of a true scholar, one "who takes knowledge as it should be taken, proclaiming it and acting upon it with sincerity to Allah."<sup>162</sup> The eulogy also sheds light for the first time on Abousamra's life in Syria, noting he fled to "the birthplace of his

<sup>157</sup> "Where's Ahmad? FBI offers \$50,000 for info on US terrorist suspect." 2012. Christian Science Monitor. October 3, 2012. <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Latest-News-Wires/2012/1003/Where-s-Ahmad-FBI-offers-50-000-for-info-on-US-terrorist-suspect>.

<sup>158</sup> "Wanted Fugitive Ahmad Abousamra Added to the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists List." 2013. FBI. December 18, 2013. <https://www.fbi.gov/boston/press-releases/2013/wanted-fugitive-ahmad-abousamra-added-to-the-fbis-most-wanted-terrorists-list>; "Most Wanted Terrorists." Federal Bureau of Investigation. [https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/wanted\\_terrorists](https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/wanted_terrorists).

<sup>159</sup> Rumiyah. 2017. "Among the Believers Are Men," April 2017.

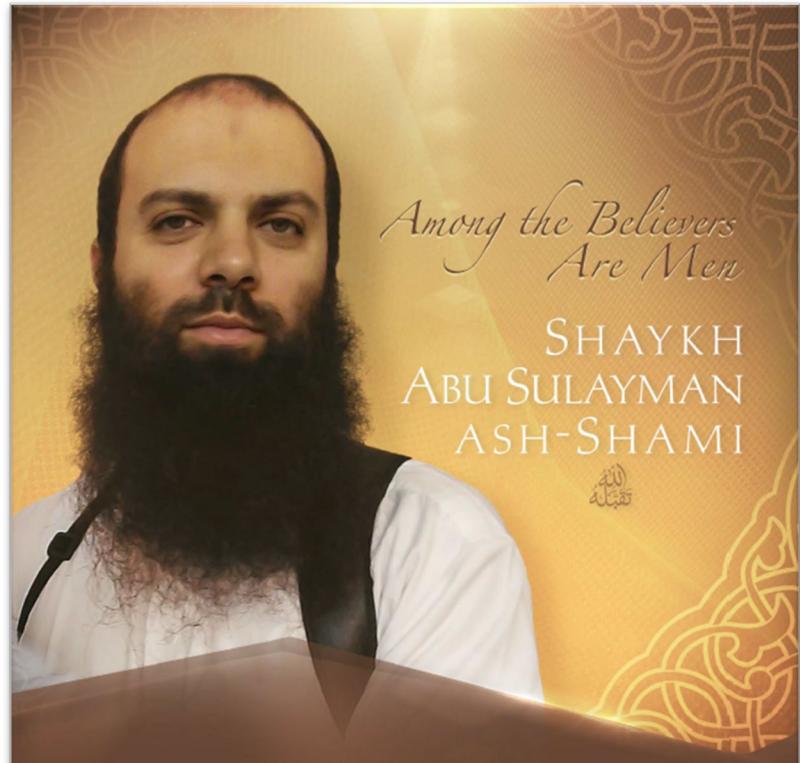
<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Karen Anderson, 2014. "FBI on Mass. Terror Suspect: 'Don't Know Where He Is, What He's Doing'." WCVB. October 15, 2014. <http://www.wcvb.com/article/fbi-onmass-terror-suspect-don-t-know-where-he-is-what-he-sdoing/8209979>.

<sup>162</sup> Rumiyah. 2017. "Among the Believers Are Men," April 2017.

fathers in Sham, staying in the city of Aleppo for a few years, seeking knowledge, calling his family and friends to tawhid, and anticipating his next chance to wage jihad.”<sup>163</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, the development and evolution of Abousamra’s views while in Boston suggests that his eventual arrival into the heart of the Islamic State was a likely outcome. In addition to his computer skills and language abilities, the extreme edges of Salafi-jihadist thought embraced by Abousamra made him a clear ideological fit with the burgeoning Caliphate. However, there is minimal evidence to suggest that Abousamra would seek to leverage these skills, at least



*Rumiyah* eulogy page for Ahmad Abousamra

not initially. As discussed throughout this case study, Abousamra’s primary motivation was to shed blood in the name of jihad; his travel to Fallujah in 2004 is specifically attributed to his desire “to find someone or some group that would help him get into the fight against the Americans.”<sup>164</sup> This desire to fight permeated through his conversations with his inner circle in Boston and online, desires likely reinforced by early experiences of being turned away repeatedly by those he held in high esteem in Pakistan and Iraq (the latter at the height of the insurgency against the occupying American forces) due to his lack of military training and suspicion surrounding the intentions of an unknown Arab-American with minimal ties or contacts.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> “Statement of Relevant Offense Conduct.” *United States of America v. Tarek Mehanna*. United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Case: 1:09-cr-10017-GAO. While, to be sure, Mehanna and Abuzahra were prepared to travel to Yemen in search of military training, and Mehanna spoke at length about his frustrations about the fact that he “left [his] life behind” to pursue their goal of fighting jihad, neither continued onto Fallujah with Abousamra; nor did either explicitly seek opportunities to travel to join jihadist causes in the intervening years. Mehanna, in particular, continued to enjoy extensive contacts with a range of jihadist actors in the West and elsewhere – including Daniel Maldonado and Omar Hammami, who both “solicited the defendant to join them as they trained with the armed wing of the Islamic Courts Union.”

<sup>165</sup> *Rumiyah*. 2017. “Among the Believers Are Men,” April 2017.

This desire did not abate once Abousamra arrived in Syria, as the eulogy details his efforts to find “the people of tawhid among the various fighting factions” as jihad reached Syria, and he was wounded while fighting in Aleppo.<sup>166</sup> Eventually, he joined soldiers of the Islamic State fighting under the banner of Jabhat al-Nusra, and, “knowing they were soldiers of the Shaykh Abu Bakr-al Baghdadi,” he requested a transfer to Iraq.<sup>167</sup> When this was denied, he requested to go on an *istishhadi* (suicide) operation, which was also rejected.<sup>168</sup> Following the split between Jabhat-al Nusra and the Islamic State, Abousamra reportedly denounced those who failed to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi, and left shortly thereafter to join the ranks of the Islamic State.<sup>169</sup>

The eulogy goes to great lengths to further establish Abousamra’s credentials, not only as a scholar who gave lessons on *aqidah* to those on the front lines, but as a true fighter, someone who “worked like the other soldiers, not considering himself to be above them due to his knowledge, nor distinguishing himself from them with any title.”<sup>170</sup> At this juncture, Abousamra is described as steadfastly committed to sacrificing his life - as described by the eulogy, only a godly intervention prevented Abousamra from potentially usurping the mantle of first suicide bomber in Syria from Moner Mohammad Abu Salha.<sup>171</sup> So the story goes, as Abousamra prepared to don an explosive belt and undertake a suicide mission in Aleppo, “Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Furqan would find him, meet with him, get to know him well, and thereafter order him to not proceed with the planned operation, sending another mujahid in his stead.”<sup>172</sup> As told within the eulogy, Abu Muhammad al-Furqan recognized the skills and value of Ahmad Abousamra and plucked him from the front lines into the Media Diwan of the Islamic State.<sup>173</sup>

It is at this point that, despite all attempts to experience the glory of jihad on the battlefield – a goal which had absorbed the previous ten years of his life – Abousamra finds himself within the bureaucracy of the burgeoning foreign language team, hierarchical in nature and designed primarily to “inform Muslims in the east and west about the Islamic State and to urge them to

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<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*; Liz Sly and Karen DeYoung, 2014. “Syria’s Jabhat al-Nusra splits from al-Qaeda and changes its name,” *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/syrias-jabhat-al-nusra-splits-from-al-qaeda-and-changes-its-name/2016/07/28/5b89ad22-54e6-11e6-b652-315ae5d4d4dd\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrias-jabhat-al-nusra-splits-from-al-qaeda-and-changes-its-name/2016/07/28/5b89ad22-54e6-11e6-b652-315ae5d4d4dd_story.html).

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*; Arian Campo-Flores, Laura Stevens and Karishma Mehrotra, 2014, “From Florida Boy to Alleged Suicide Bomber in Syria.” *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/from-florida-boy-to-alleged-suicide-bomber-in-syria-1401579937>.

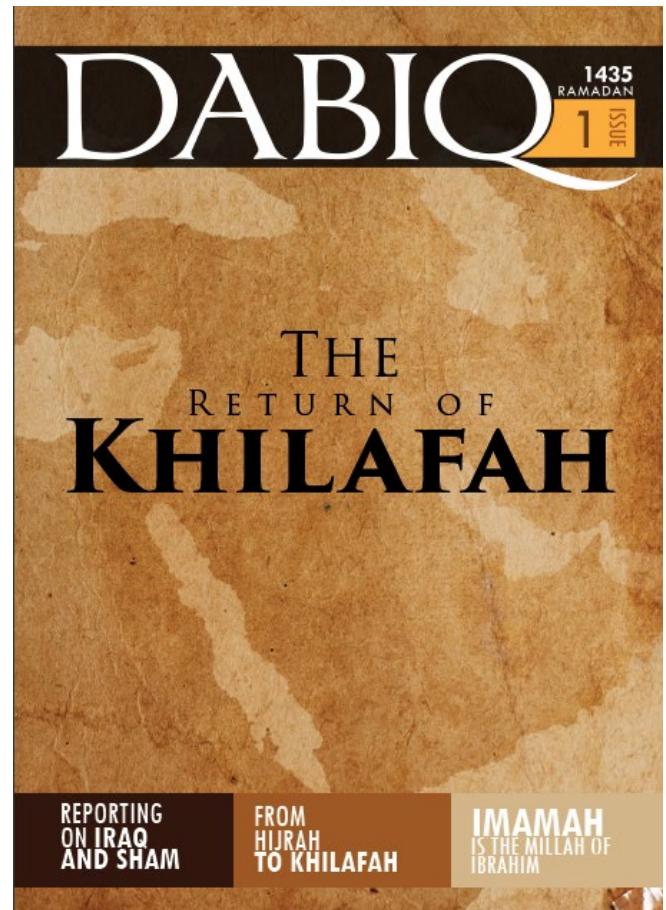
<sup>172</sup> Rumiyah. 2017. “Among the Believers Are Men,” April 2017.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*; “Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, 2018, *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, (February 2018).

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>.

perform hijrah to it.”<sup>174</sup> It was here, working on videos released under the ‘al-Hayat Media Center’ banner and translation efforts, that Abousamra’s “gifts of writing, composition, and cognition began to surface, as the light of shar’i knowledge shone in what he said and wrote.”<sup>175</sup>

Ghost writing under ‘Abu Maysarah ash-Shami’ on behalf of al-Furqan, Abousamra quickly earned al Furqan’s trust, who “saw him as his obedient soldier, who would not disobey him in any virtuous matter, nor give preference to others over him, nor be stingy when giving him counsel.”<sup>176</sup> Perhaps the most significant singular article known to have been written by Abousamra under this pen name was the 2016 publication of “The Jews of Jihad: Zawahiri’s Al-Qaeda.”<sup>177</sup> The phrase itself, aimed at jihadists, al-Qaida supporters in particular, who had failed to join the ranks of the Islamic State, quickly became a common pejorative.<sup>178</sup> There is also an unconfirmed claim within the eulogy that Abousamra played a role in the planning for an attempted external operations plot “to kill the American apostate Hamza Yusuf during his last trip to Turkey.”<sup>179</sup>



Issue 1 of *Dabiq*

Following this period, Abousamra’s role expanded – a period which coincided with a marked shift in production value of Islamic State’s propaganda.<sup>180</sup> He reportedly began directing the translation efforts for the Islamic State’s newest product, the monthly magazine *Dabiq*, serving

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

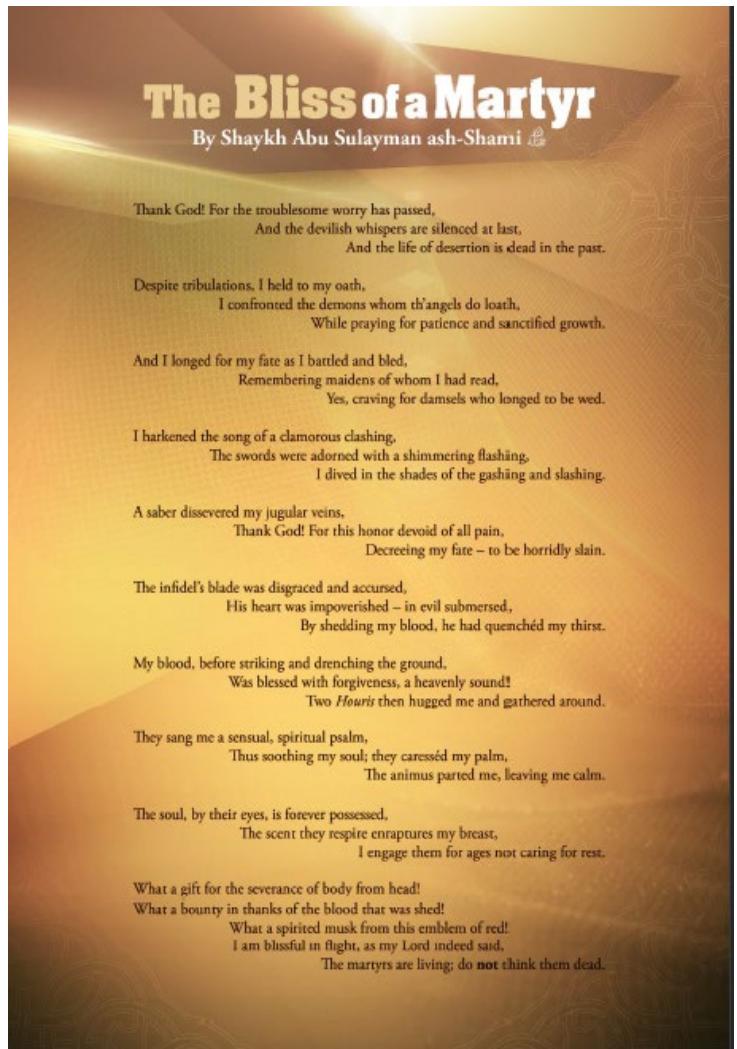
<sup>177</sup> Jack Moore, 2015, “ISIS Ideologue Calls Al-Qaeda the ‘Jews of Jihad’ As Rivalry Continues,” *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-ideologue-calls-al-qaeda-jews-jihad-rivalry-continues-419320>.

<sup>178</sup> Thomas Joscelyn. 2017. “How a US Citizen Became a Key Player in the Islamic State’s Rivalry with Al Qaeda.” FDD’s Long War Journal. April 7, 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/04/how-a-us-citizen-became-a-key-player-in-the-islamic-states-rivalry-with-al-qaeda.php>; Abousamra, Ahmad (Abu Maysarah ash-Shami). 2016. “Jews of Jihad: Zawahiri’s Al Qaeda.” <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Arabic-version-of-Jews-of-Jihad.pdf>.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Nathaniel Greenberg, 2020. “Islamic State War Documentaries”, International Journal of Communication 14(2020) 1808-1829. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/9857/3028>.

as chief editor and contributor.<sup>181</sup> As Abousamra's importance continued to grow within the media department, he began working on the new production, *Rumiyyah*. However, Abousamra's mentor and propaganda chief, Abu Muhammad al Furqan, was killed in September 2016, and the eulogy claims "His departure greatly saddened Abu Sulayman, as could easily be seen, due to the lofty position the shaykh held in his heart, as well as his knowledge of the shaykh's status." Following this, Abousamra is reported to have "continued requesting permission to go to ribat and participate in battle," seeking "the most dangerous" forward positions. This led him to the city of Al-Tabaqah<sup>182</sup> which was under "Crusader aerial bombardment" where he remained until he was killed in January 2017 "by a missile that struck the house in which they were entrenched."<sup>183</sup>



*Alongside Abousamra's eulogy in Inspire is an original poem attributed to him, called "The Bliss of a Martyr."*

Fittingly, the eulogy ends with yet another acknowledgment that Abousamra's primary intent throughout this experience was to engage the enemies of the Islamic State on the battlefield as a warrior-scholar, claiming "he pursued the course to which he called others, so his end was as he wished: to be killed for the cause of Allah on the frontlines"<sup>184</sup> and that he "achieved that which he desired most, and the story of his jihad ended just as he had wanted at its beginning: with martyrdom for the cause of Allah, on the frontlines, neither turning his face away from the enemy nor fleeing from battle."

These closing lines, in particular, were meant to cement Abousamra's posthumous legacy. While, to be sure, Awlaki and Khan produced a far more extensive corpus of propaganda, Abousamra's

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*; "Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, 2018, *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, (February 2018).

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>.

<sup>182</sup> Also known as Al-Thawrah.

<sup>183</sup> Rumiyyah. 2017. "Among the Believers Are Men," April 2017.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

significance within the Islamic State's media bureaucracy has only been brought to light with his death. This stark contrast is made evident within the life narrative set forth in his eulogy, from a relatively unknown American who was turned away on four separate occasions by jihadist organizations and whose pragmatic leadership qualities eventually led to his acknowledgment as one of the most celebrated propagandists within the Islamic State's media bureaucracy.

**Table 4: Ahmad Abousamra eulogy**

Six Life Events, CIP Framework	Excerpts from the Islamic State's eulogy for Ahmad Abousamra: Among the Believers Are Men: Shaykh Abu Sulayman Ash-Shami
Origination	From Klausen: "Ahmad Abousamra started watching Al Qaeda videos in 1996, when he was 15. In 1999 or 2000, his friend Tarek Mehanna joined him in watching videos. Eventually others joined. The participants would remain in contact via blogs and forums over the years and throughout their various moves."
Turning Point	"He continued to insist that the umara allow him to execute his own operation...So the plan was made for him to sneak into the middle of a gathering and detonate his explosive belt, thereby ripping apart those murtaddin. But no one dies before his time is due, and Allah ordained that Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Furqan would find him, meet with him, get to know him well, and thereafter order him to not proceed with the planned operation, sending another mujahid in his stead. It was then decided to bring him to the Media Diwan of the Islamic State, which Shaykh Abu Muhammad was striving to enhance by widening its activities and supporting it with cadres of qualified scholars and technicians."
Anchoring	Abousamra experienced numerous failures in his early attempts to travel overseas to join various jihadist organizations. "They left as muhajirin to Allah, not coordinating their journey with anyone. they roamed between Yemen, Pakistan, and Iraq, hoping to meet someone who would bring them to the mujahidin. But once they became weary of finding the way, and as they feared inciting the suspicions of intelligence agencies, they returned to America, asking Allah to guide them towards their goal."
Analogous	n/a
Redemptive	After unsuccessful travel attempts, Abousamra returned to the United States and planned domestic terror attacks with his co-conspirators. These failed plots were ultimately discovered, and Abousamra narrowly escaped arrest. "However, Allah decreed otherwise, and He does what He wills. Their plot was discovered just days before the operation's appointed time. But Allah saved him from falling into captivity, allowing him to leave America before the FBI could gather sufficient information to release an order for his arrest at the borders and airports. So he returned to the birthplace of his fathers in Sham, staying in the city of Aleppo for a few years, seeking knowledge, calling his family and friends to tawhid, and anticipating his next chance to wage jihad."
Contaminating	n/a

## The Enduring Impact of an American Legacy

It is important consider some of the overarching lessons to emerge from the examples of Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir Khan, and Ahmad Abousamra for understanding this uniquely American legacy in the evolution of Western jihadism. Perhaps the most pertinent for both researchers and policymakers relate to leadership, organizational context and strategic drivers, and the evolution of jihadist English-language propaganda.

### *American leadership*

For all their broad similarities, al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra emerge as three quite distinct figures in the English-speaking jihadist milieu. The CIP Framework offers a useful lens through which to explore some of their most important distinguishing features.<sup>185</sup> Indeed the three Americans emerge as almost near ideal typecasts of the CIP Framework's three forms of outstanding leadership: charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic.<sup>186</sup>

Al-Awlaki is clearly the standout in terms of his general name recognition, direct impact on terrorist trends in the West, and the continued public leveraging of his legacy by jihadist groups. This is the result of the type of leader that he was and posthumously remains. Al-Awlaki is the prototypical charismatic leader and maintaining that charismatic appeal, including in death, requires its regular projection to target audiences. Reflecting the notion that the "visions of charismatic leaders tend to point to the positive aspects of the future goals, while at the same time conveying negative aspects of the present conditions"<sup>187</sup> underscores a defining feature of al-Awlaki's image and message: exacerbating perceptions of crisis experienced by Muslims in the West to not only legitimize but render urgent engagement in violence.

In contrast, Khan is an example of an ideological leader according to the CIP Framework.<sup>188</sup> Having devoted his life to being a jihadi propagandist, his knowledge and skills were channeled into championing his belief system, jihadi history and values to audiences while not merely dismissing but condemning the beliefs of others. The CIP Framework asserts that "ideological leaders define clear prescriptions or standards of acceptable behavior, and they tend to punish

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<sup>185</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 312-334; Gina Scott Ligon, Michael K. Logan, Douglas C. Derrick, 2021, *Malevolent charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders*, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>186</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 313.

<sup>187</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 313.

<sup>188</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, "Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 313.

those who deviate from those principles”,<sup>189</sup> and Khan’s writings as well as his self-appointed nickname “Abu Shidah” (from the noun *Shidah*, which means harshness) underscores this point. Working behind the keyboard and the camera, Khan’s impact on advancements in the theory and practice of jihadist English-language propaganda, not to mention his role as a hub in Western jihadi networks especially online, is arguably just as impactful as al-Awlaki, albeit in a different way.

Abousamra exemplifies the functional, problem-based leadership of Ligon et al’s pragmatic leader. The distinction between pragmatic and ideological leaders within the CIP Framework is particularly noteworthy: “pragmatic leaders exhibit flexibility in adapting strategies when faced with incoming feedback that a particular strategy is not working. This is sharply contrasted by ideological styles, which appear to be more committed to their initial action plans and resistant to redirection”<sup>190</sup> This contrast is clear in the way Abousamra actively pursued different jihadi organizations throughout his life compared to Khan, who remained steadfastly committed to al-Qaida. Indeed it seems Abousamra was always in search of the right opportunity to engage in jihad, all the while remaining flexible in his choice of destination and group. Abousamra apparently expressed little interest, at least based on court records, in producing propaganda or translating jihadist materials. While law enforcement sources highlight his “arrogance of righteousness” and his leadership qualities shine through in a detailed examination of his activities while in the United States, there is little evidence to suggest some longstanding desire to embrace the role of a propagandist.<sup>191</sup> In lockstep with the CIP model set forth by Ligon et al, sources suggest that Abousamra became a prominent propagandist in the Islamic State due largely to how his skills fit within its bureaucracy where, it turns out, he would excel. Yet his activities and status as a prominent Western jihadist would only emerge in death.

### *Organizational & Strategic Context Matters*

The organizational and strategic context within which al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra operated significantly impacted their influence and legacy. While all three men were of similar age and their ideological and political beliefs had been forged on many of the same jihadi online networks, which they had in turn helped to shape, the approaches they adopted to propaganda design and dissemination reflected the groups within which they were operating. In short, the impact and nature of their legacy did not emerge due singularly to their personal/leadership

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<sup>189</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, “Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach”, *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 313.

<sup>190</sup> Gina Scott Ligon, Samuel T. Hunter, Michael D. Mumford, 2008, “Development of outstanding leadership: A life narrative approach”, *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 313.

<sup>191</sup> Authors’ interview with senior law enforcement official, May 2021.

traits. For al-Awlaki and Khan, they brought tried and tested strategies and reputations to AQAP and, from what can be gleaned from available sources, seemed to have been given the space to run *Inspire* how they saw fit. Moreover, given how *underdeveloped* the architecture and practice of jihadist English-language propaganda was at the time, al-Awlaki and Khan had plenty of scope to advance the field however they saw fit while also having some second-mover benefits thanks to predecessors like *Nida'ul Islam*.

Organizationally and strategically, AQAP was engaged in an active insurgency in Yemen while being the most prominent al-Qaida affiliate in global operations at the time. Al-Awlaki and Khan's globally directed propaganda contributed to bringing attention to both efforts. The Abbottabad Papers, a tranche of documents captured from Bin Laden's compound, suggests that the al-Qaida figurehead may have had reservations about al-Awlaki's role in AQAP. In a letter dated August 2010, Bin Laden asked for more information on al-Awlaki acknowledging that "the presence of some of the characteristics by our brother Anwar al-'Awlaqi is a good thing" but "how excellent would it be if he gives us a chance to be introduced to him more."<sup>192</sup> Bin Laden goes onto state: "send us the resume, in detail and lengthy, of brother Anwar al-'Awlaqi, as well as the facts he relied on when recommending him, while informing him that his recommendation is considered."<sup>193</sup> The potential significance of this letter is captured when one considers that Bin Laden was concerned about al-Qaida's condition and was considering changing the group's name because "al-Qa'ida describes a military base with fighters without a reference to our broader mission to unify the nation."<sup>194</sup> Moreover, while al-Awlaki and Khan's efforts may have had short to medium term benefits to AQAP, it may have been seen to undermine al-Qaida's strategic cohesion and direction. This is, in fact, typical of the types of organizational concerns that emerge in adhocracies like al-Qaida. The overarching point is that al-Awlaki and Khan had relatively few restrictions especially given their long-held support for al-Qaida's jurisprudential and strategic principles.

In contrast, Abousamra is chosen by the Islamic State's legendary propagandist, Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, to join the Islamic State's media operations as an English-language propagandist. Within the Islamic State's bureaucracy, Abousamra was essentially transferred to the Media Diwan where he worked on media products. Several studies based on primary sources

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<sup>192</sup> SOCOM-2012-0000003-HT, p.2. <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2012/images/05/03/obl.docs/SOCOM-2012-0000003-Trans.pdf>.

<sup>193</sup> SOCOM-2012-0000003-HT, p.2. <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2012/images/05/03/obl.docs/SOCOM-2012-0000003-Trans.pdf>.

<sup>194</sup> SOCOM-2012-0000009-HT, p.1. <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2012/images/05/03/obl.docs/SOCOM-2012-0000009-Trans.pdf>.

have empirically shown that the Islamic State's media apparatus is organizationally centralized, indeed more than most other parts of the movement, reflecting the central role of propaganda in campaign planning.<sup>195</sup> This heightened degree of centralized command and control over the Islamic State's media activities, which would have been especially pronounced during the years of its greatest conventional success, meant that its propagandists would have been expected to conform to established guidelines.<sup>196</sup> Clearly, intellectually gifted and technically skilled people operated in the Islamic State's Media Diwan and it was seen by the movement's leaders as a place for specialists and future leaders. The key point is that Abousamra needed to work within this more structured bureaucratic context and this naturally shaped – for better or worse – the content he developed.

### *Revolutionizing Jihadist English-Language Propaganda*

*Inspire*, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyyah* magazines are the primary contributions of the three Americans, although al-Awlaki has a cannon of speeches and writing that are just as significant. It is useful to consider the different propaganda strategies applied in these magazines as these trends are indicative of a complex interplay of factors. One of the most significant potentially being editorial decisions that reflect the strategic and operational goals of AQAP and the Islamic State.<sup>197</sup> For example, the linguistic style and general communication strategies used in *Inspire* and *Dabiq* are very different.<sup>198</sup> *Inspire*'s trademark colloquial and idiomatic style is undoubtedly a reflection of al-Awlaki and Khan's personal communication styles. The authors of *Inspire* tended to be al-Awlaki, Khan, senior AQAP officials, or individuals with inventive names like "Jonas the Rebel", a similar approach used in *Jihad Recollections* with authors like "Savvy Irhabi".

*Inspire*'s messaging was meant to feel like a direct and personal communication, stripped of complex jurisprudence and linguistic barriers, delivered in a manner that appealed to identity and emotion as much as rational cost-benefit appeals. This communication style complemented *Inspire*'s broader strategic intent which was, ultimately, to convince its readers to engage in acts of terrorism at home. For that purpose, its "Open Source Jihad" section offered individual jihadis

<sup>195</sup> Daniel Milton, 2016, *Communication Breakdown: Unravelling the Islamic State's Media Efforts*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. [https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/ISMedia\\_Online.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/ISMedia_Online.pdf); Craig Whiteside, 2016, "Lighting the Path: The Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016), International Center for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague. <https://icct.nl/publication/lighting-the-path-the-evolution-of-the-islamic-state-media-enterprise-2003-2016/>.

<sup>196</sup> Daniel Milton, 2018, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An inside look at the Islamic State's media organization*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. <https://ctc.usma.edu/pulling-back-the-curtain-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-media-organization/>; Charlie Winter, 2020, "Redefining 'Propaganda': The Media Strategy of the Islamic State", *RUSI Journal* 165(1). <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-journal/redefining-%E2%80%98propaganda%E2%80%99-media-strategy-islamic-state>.

<sup>197</sup> For a more detailed analysis see Haroro J. Ingram, 2017, "An analysis of *Inspire* and *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40 (5): 357-375.

<sup>198</sup> For a more detailed analysis see Haroro J. Ingram, 2017, "An analysis of *Inspire* and *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40 (5): 357-375.

technical operational advice. An overemphasis on *Inspire*'s "Open Source Jihad" section misses the fact that it was embedded in a broader propaganda architecture of emotional appeals, jurisprudential arguments, historical precedence, strategic context, and psychological support.

In contrast, *Dabiq* and later *Rumiyah* used comparatively more formal language emphasizing the jurisprudential obligations to support the Islamic State which it had established for itself by declaring its caliphate. After all, the Islamic State's spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani was unequivocal at the time of the announcement:

We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of khilāfah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalīfah Ibrāhīm and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khilāfah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.<sup>199</sup>

*Dabiq*'s contents incessantly reinforced this point using a variety of appeals. The most explicit were simply its ideological/jurisprudential arguments that simply stated that Muslims anywhere in the world were compelled to pledge to the Caliph and support the caliphate. This was reinforced in subtle ways too.

For example, articles in *Dabiq* rarely identified an author unless there was a strategic purpose such as it was a senior Islamic State figure or the author's identity (e.g., gender) reinforced the communicative purpose of the content.<sup>200</sup> Moreover, those articles that did not identify an author typically read, for some if not most of its contents, as a series of excerpts from the Quran and Sunnah. The effect was that such content projected not only a sense of inherent authority and credibility but that it was divinely foretold. Through 2014-15, *Dabiq* mostly focused on convincing English-speaking Muslims to travel to Islamic State lands to live in the caliphate's territories or establish local affiliates. However, its successor English-language magazine *Rumiyah*, which emerged in September 2016 amidst the Islamic State's conventional destruction, tended to promote engagement in terrorism. Unlike *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah* provided operational advice to its readers in a "Just Terror" section. But, like *Inspire*, it is important to see *Rumiyah*'s "Just Terror" section as part of a broader propaganda architecture designed to

<sup>199</sup> Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, 2014, *This is the Promise of Allah*, Al-Hayat Media.

<sup>200</sup> Kiriloi M. Ingram, 2021, "An analysis of Islamic State's Gendered Propaganda Targeted Towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency", *Terrorism & Political Violence*.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2021.1919637?journalCode=ftpv20>.

convince readers to engage in violence. All of this is to highlight the persistent influence and legacy of the three Americans years after their deaths.

## Conclusion: Future Research & Policy Implications

For observers of the extraordinary evolution of Western jihadism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, three Americans standout from the pack as having had arguably the most influence on jihadist English-language propaganda: Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir Khan, and Ahmad Abousamra. Of course, their influence extends well-beyond the propaganda sphere, especially in the case of al-Awlaki and Khan who significantly contributed to a more globally connected, operationally savvy, and strategically informed threat in the West. The purpose of this study was to consider the factors which contributed to their impacts and legacies. Khan openly acknowledged that his generation were not the first jihadis living in the West to attempt to appeal to English speaking audiences with strategically tailored propaganda content. This study has argued that what separated al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra from their predecessors and peers is the combination of their roles as leaders, the historical context within which they were active, and the posthumous legacies that their respective organizations (and other Sunni jihadists) have looked to exploit.

This study was purposely broad in its scope as it sought to lay the foundations for more narrowly focused analyses each with potential strategic-policy implications. Five areas of future research are particularly noteworthy. First, a more comprehensive application of the CIP framework to al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra, ideally reinforced by other conceptual models, would offer a more nuanced and empirical picture of their backgrounds and influence as leaders. In-depth examinations of al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra as individual case studies could then be used to inform more detailed comparative analyses. More broadly, it underscores the importance of studying not only violent extremist propaganda but the propagandists themselves.

Second, an enormous collection of Khan and al-Awlaki's writings and speeches exists which spans the years of their trajectory from outwardly non-violent activists to AQAP propagandists. These primary sources offer unique opportunities to not only analyze the evolution of their ideas over time but engage in the type of comparative analyses that could identify rhetorical indicators of shifts in attitude towards violence. For example, applying the linkage method of propaganda analysis<sup>201</sup> offers a methodical approach to identify the mix of psychosocial and strategic appeals used in these works and how these strategies may shift over time.

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<sup>201</sup> The linkage approach has been applied in studies such as JM Berger, 2018, *Extremism*, Cambridge, MIT Press; Alastair Reed, Jennifer Dowling, 2018, "The role of historical narratives in extremist propaganda", *Defense Strategic Communications*, volume 4, Spring 2018: pp.79-104; Joe Whittaker, Lilah Elsayed, 2019, "Linkages as a lens: An exploration of strategic communications in P/CVE", *Journal of Deradicalization*, number 20. Available online: <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/243>; Haroro J. Ingram, 2020, "The strategic logic of Islamic State's full-spectrum propaganda," *ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message*, Oxford University Press, New York: pp. 20-49.

Third, little is known about Abousamra's time working in the Islamic State's media unit. More broadly, Abousamra's trajectory post-2006 onwards is largely a blind spot for Western sources, even for law enforcement officials interviewed for this study. Insights into Abousamra's roles in the Islamic State would provide important insights into the Islamic State's bureaucracies, especially its media units, but also how Abousamra developed as a propagandist. This also highlights the need for broader analyses tracking the roles of other Western jihadists in the Islamic State's bureaucracy.

Fourth, by applying the life narrative approach to examine al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra's eulogies, this study highlighted the potential for other studies to use the six life events as an analytical framework through which to assess eulogies as propaganda. The way in which the lives of violent extremists are constructed in eulogies requires methodical analyses to identify how life events are constructed to potentially not just appeal to target audiences but generate posthumous charismatic appeal. This analytical approach could be used to examine eulogies for violent extremists emerging from across the ideological spectrum.

Fifth, this study underscores the need to apply a methodical approach to understanding American extremist mobilization writ large. Indeed, previous research by the Program on Extremism underscores the proportionally low number of Americans emerging from both the landscape of homegrown jihadist activity within the United States and as foreign fighters, especially compared to mobilization trends in European countries.<sup>202</sup> Yet, there is the outsized impact of al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra within the Western jihadist milieu suggestions that there is either 'something' about these three Americans and the context within which they emerged that saw them standout from others. This study has attempted to contribute towards a better understanding of these dynamics by examining the interplay of personal attributes, leadership qualities, organizational context, and opportunities. There is significant space for more in-depth studies that have important strategic-policy implications. For instance, all three men were connected to non-violent, Brotherhood linked, activist organizations – a trend which highlights the continued importance of more in-depth examinations of such trajectories.<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, a better understanding of the development of leadership qualities within

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<sup>202</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, 2018, *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, (February 2018).

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>; Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, 2015, *ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa*, (December 2015).

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>203</sup> See, for example Lorenzo Vidino, 2010, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West*, Columbia University Press, New York.

homegrown violent extremists would enable scholars and practitioners to more clearly identify the conditions which are conducive to different types of leaders emerging and flourishing in the United States.

As highlighted throughout this study, this analysis has important implications for practitioners. Overall, it is differences in leadership types and the potential for rhetoric/propaganda analysis to support strategic and operational decision-making that connects most of these findings. Leadership manifests in different ways that inevitably reflect not only the leader's personality, expertise, and experience but broader factors like organizational context, strategic aims, and the ideological drivers of the group. Understanding the interplay of these factors and being able to recognize them in investigations better positions practitioners to make informed operational and strategic decisions. The trajectories of al-Awlaki, Khan, and Abousamra's lives from non-violent activists to jihadis offers practitioners insights into the complex mix of personal and contextual changes that can contribute to radicalization.

For example, studies have shown that there is little difference between how violent and non-violent groups describe their adversaries (i.e. Outgroup identities).<sup>204</sup> The fundamental difference between violent and non-violent groups tends to be how they describe themselves with violent group's tending to emphasize the in-group's purity and the urgency of their need to confront enemies. A particularly worrying rhetorical trend, especially combined with those previously mentioned, is rhetoric that condemns otherwise in-group members as enemies. This is just one example of potential rhetorical markers of shifts in attitudes towards violence in the speeches and writings of violent extremist leaders that are important to identify and contextualize to inform operational and strategic decisions. This study has highlighted areas of future research, as well as methods to inform those studies, that could help to fill this void.

Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir Khan, and Ahmad Abousamra represent three fundamentally different types of leaders. Each experienced uniquely significant life events which helped to shape their development as leaders and propagandists as well as impacted their roles within AQAP and the Islamic State. Despite the clear differences set forth in these case studies, each served as key drivers of the evolution of jihadist English-language propaganda, with their influence on the strategic, operational, and ideological trends in Western jihadist networks likely to continue for many years to come.

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<sup>204</sup> See, for example, Smith, A. "From words to actions". *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 5 (2004), pp. 409-437.